

Children of a Lesser God by odetoblu

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Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

After dying under Neibolt, Eddie wakes up in his 13-year-old body in the woods outside Hawkins, Indiana with nothing more than the clothes on his body and a message from a psychic god-turtle.

("Eddie Kaspbrak, saver of children...

...weird.")

1. A Turtle Shaped Space

The first time Eddie Kaspbrak opens his eyes after dying, he's standing at the bottom of the ocean.

He blinks. A school of small, brightly colored fish swim by his head.

He blinks again, even though he doesn't really need to. His eyes could not possibly be any more moist than they are at this moment. He vaguely wonders why they don't burn, since the salt concentration here has to be crazy—

'Ah,' he remembers, 'that's right.'

At least being dead had a few perks.

"Maybe a few perks, but it's not nearly as useful as living."

The voice that isn't his is deep, resonant and soft, and it rings faintly in his ears like he's standing in the chapel of the church the Hanlons used to attend and not standing at the bottom of the ocean.

Which was surprisingly bright. It reminded him of the beaches he'd seen on postcards for places Hawaii and the Bahamas, with ocean water so clear the sun shone straight through to the sand beneath. Eddie wasn't exactly an oceanographer, but he'd always thought the bottom of the ocean was supposed to be super fucking dark? That's where all the creepy shit lived, like the fish with twenty eyes or the ones with the little dangling light and the massive teeth—

"Focus, child."

The voice was back, but Eddie couldn't figure out where it was coming from. He also couldn't get his own mouth to work.

'Are you... God?' He thought, as more fish swam by. These were little silver things that darted through the water like tiny shooting stars.

"I am that which created the world you know."

'What a fucking non-answer.'

"I would try to put it in terms you would understand, but there are more important matters at hand."

Eddie felt floaty, like someone slipped something into his drink. He asked the voice as much.

"I would let you rest as you have earned, my child, but I am in need of a champion one last time. Already I keep you too long between realms."

A champion?' Eddie almost laughed. He wasn't a champion. He still carried around an inhaler he didn't actually need at 40 years old. He'd cowered in the corner when things got hard or scary. He'd barely managed to help get Richie out of the Deadlights before getting shish-kabobbed—

His chest gives a telltale throb, but it's not so much a physical pain.

Oh, Richie. Handsome, funny, sweet Richie. They ran out of time.

"On the contrary—you have been chosen as my champion from the time you were born. You and the six other lights, Shining so brightly I knew you would grow to do what I could not."

Why hadn't he said it when—he had the perfect opportunity, and—but now Richie would never know—

The voice boomed, louder than before, "Pay attention, child. You wish to see the other lights again?"

Five more aches joined his chest. The weight anchored him.

'More than anything.'

The voice was suddenly right behind him. "Then do as I say. My brother threatens another realm, and it is time to end this game once and for all. I tire of losing lights." The voice did sound tired. "Save the children, and I will bring you home."

Eddie began to turn toward the mystery speaker slowly. It was like he was moving through molasses.

He had so many questions, but only one of them made it through.

'But why me?'

"Oh Eddie," and how did this thing know his name? "You have always been the bravest of them all."

Just as his eyes managed to land on the massive turtle sitting in the sand behind him, it took off into the water. Eddie felt a heaviness descend as the turtle's great shadow passed over him, and he closed his eyes. Then Eddie Kaspbrak knew no more.

xxx

The second time Eddie Kaspbrak opened his eyes after dying, it was because *the sun was in his fucking eyes.*

He groaned and rolled over, trying to hide from the sun peeking through the curtains, but something sharp was suddenly poking him in the cheek. It was definitely going to irritate the hole already in his face, and he drowsily brought a hand up to adjust the bandage—

He froze.

There was no hole in his face.

There was no hole in his face.

There was no hole in his face and he was not laying in his bedroom of course he couldn't be in his bedroom he had fucking blackout curtains—

Eddie shot up, disrupting the light layer of leaves that had begun to cover him like a blanket, and sending some nearby squirrels chittering up a tree. He was in a...woods? But it didn't feel like the Barrens—he couldn't hear the running of the water from the creek, or the gentle rustle of the hundreds of deer that made homes deep between in the forests of Maine. More than that, this woods felt... off. Sinister.

Haunted.

Something's wrong.

He tried to climb to his feet but overestimated and went tumbling

back down to the ground.

“What the—”

He stared at his hands, splayed on the ground below him. Small—too small for a wedding ring. A little calloused, from throwing rocks at bullies, or picking up the latch to the clubhouse.

Eddie stared and stared and stared some more.

“—fuck.”

Slowly he sank back onto his heels, gaze drifting downward. Yellow t-shirt. Red shorts with the little stripes on the side. White tube socks and sneakers.

Only missing—

But no, only a few feet away it sat, zipper reflecting the sunlight mockingly. It was clean—cleaner than he'd ever remembered it, given how much use it got.

He reached, with these strange child hands that felt so foreign and so familiar at the same time. The fabric was the same—80 percent water resistant, he'd bragged when he got it.

“So what, it'll only protect against 80 percent of whatever comes out of your mom's—”

“Are YOU SERIOUS—”

He huffed a little laugh under his breath at the recovered memory. He'd hated those jokes, but they were sort of like their secret language, his and Richie's.

Richie.

“Save the children,” Eddie breathed, and it all came rushing back, “and I will bring you home.”

He groaned, dropping the fanny pack and clutching his throbbing head. He was a child. He was a *literal child*, so how the fuck was he

supposed to save anyone? He'd barely been able to save himself as a kid, and looking at his wife—well, ex-wife—history had repeated itself in his adulthood. And who needed saving in the middle of bumfuck nowhere? What kids? Where was Richie? Was he okay? Did the others make it out alive or were they buried under Neibolt like he was—

The trees rustled around him, laughing at his pain and a shiver ran up his spine at the brisk breeze. He heaved a few deep breaths.

“Get your shit together, Kaspbrak.”

Oh god, his voice was so *high*—

He managed to stand after a minute of breathing exercises an old therapist had taught him, feeling quite like a baby deer or like what Richie must have felt like when he shot up from five ten to six one in a single summer.

Where the fuck was he, anyway? Upon greater examination, he was certain there was no way these woods could be the Barrens. Eddie's internal compass had always been scary good—as a kid it saved him and the Losers when they were running from bullies, and as an adult it's what made him an excellent (read: aggressive) city driver. But when he thought about the Barrens, about Derry the way he usually did when he wanted to get somewhere, he felt... nothing. No pulling sensation in his gut, no sharp tingle in the air as the magnets of where he was and where he wanted to be called him in the right direction. He looked down at his hands again, helpless.

If Eddie were Stan, he'd figure out where he was based on observing the local bird population, and would be able to rattle off a list of possible locations, or he'd use some weird trick he'd learned in the boy scouts to—

Guess Stanley could not cut it.

Tears pushed at the back of his eyes. He shook his head to dispel the image of tiny papers spread across a dinner table. He wasn't in Derry anymore, and the clown was dead. So what was he doing here?

Save the children, and I will bring you home.

His stomach rumbled, loudly. Whoever these fucking kids were, they were going to have to wait.

He closed his eyes and reset his internal compass.

Food.

The familiar pull was back, and Eddie Kaspbrak picked up his fanny pack moved forward.

xxx

Though the woods had seemed incredibly dense at first, Eddie found himself at a dirt road after only about fifteen minutes. He followed it—west, the wind whispered—dragging once clean white sneakers through damp dirt and leaves.

He was still getting used to looking down and seeing skinny little legs and not the well toned muscles he'd built as an adult. Thankfully Myra, unlike his mother, hadn't objected to his time spent at the company gym in the name of peak health—and when she did complain, it only took a complimentary comment or two from her friends or an admiring gaze from her sister at family gatherings to shut her up. It was a silent agreement they had: Eddie would play her successful arm candy husband, and she didn't question where he spent the extra hours between finishing work and heading home.

Maybe she was only okay with it because she always knew he'd come back at the end of the day. Like a kept pet, too dumb and loyal to know better. God knows he'd stared at the gold ring on his finger and imagined it like a collar around his neck too many times.

Eddie balled his fists hard enough that he could feel his fingers digging crescents into his palms. He let go before he could do any real damage, but the restless heat lingered uncomfortably under his skin. Needing to find something else to do with his hands, he turned his attention to the fanny pack currently slung over his shoulder, tight across his chest.

There'd been something too... vulnerable, too familiar, too young

about buckling around his waist like he had as a kid. He'd remembered the vindictive, righteous feeling the first time he'd seen some kids online wearing fanny packs across their chests, the article claiming they were coming back into fashion strong that year. Sure they were calling them "cross body bags" now, but Eddie was *right*, had been *ahead of his time* even, and he picked up his phone to call and let— let who know?

At the time Eddie had stared at his phone in confusion, not sure who he would have shared this dumb information with. Who would care that he'd once worn fanny packs like a religion?

Now Eddie imagined Richie's voice laughing through the phone, warm and bright as he teased Eddie for being one of the *cool kids*, and *hip with it* and *wow Eddie was so trendy, like, do you think Eddie would, like, ask him to homecoming?*

It probably meant something that Eddie's mental impression of Richie was so good, he was starting to annoy himself. And if it ached a little, underneath, well that probably meant something too.

He unzipped the fanny pack to find the larger compartment entirely empty.

Helpful.

The smaller compartment's zipper was a little jammed, but when he finally got it open he was less than impressed to see a small rock inside. He pulled it out, tempted to chuck it on principle, but something stopped him. It sat comfortably in his palm, and Eddie's eyes traced the strange shape, the four even bumps and one slightly larger, the white almost geometric pattern on the curved surface.

The rock was shaped like a turtle.

Eddie stared at it for a while before sighing.

"That's not fucking funny."

xxx

By the time the dirt turned into asphalt, the hungry rumbles

in Eddie's stomach had turned to pains. Thankfully, his gut told him he was close, and within another half an hour or so, clusters of buildings started coming into view. It was a small downtown, not unlike Derry's own, and not for the first time today Eddie wondered if he'd been dropped into the Twilight Zone.

There was a bank, a grocery store (he salivated), a pharmacy (he shuddered), something that might be a general store, the newspaper —

Eddie's eyes lingered. *The Hawkins Post.*

What's a Hawkins?

There weren't any newspaper stands near the door of the paper—seemed like a missed marketing opportunity—and Eddie didn't want to stand around lingering in the middle of town. He was already starting to get some strange looks from people walking by.

They should fucking look at themselves first, looking like some cheap background actors in a bad 80's movie.

His brain felt like it was going a mile a minute. He walked—swiftly, but not so quick as to startle anyone—towards the general store. His stomach panged at the thought of walking away from the grocer, but he needed to get his bearings. The name MELVALD'S stood in faded red paint on the sign, and some bells above the door gave a little jingle when he opened it.

"Welcome!" A warm voice called and Eddie startled a bit. A woman with brown hair and a tired smile emerged from some of the shelves, holding a pricing gun casually in one hand.

"Um, hi," Christ, Eddie remembered feeling awkward talking to adults at 13, but he was 40-fucking years old god dammit, no matter what his body looked like. "Can I see a newspaper please?"

"Your parents didn't get one this morning?"

"...No. They missed our house." She smiled again and walked over to the counter before handing him a newspaper and leaning in conspiratorially. Her nametag said "JOYCE" in bright red letters.

“They miss my house a lot too. They’re fifty cents each.”

“I just want to check something.” The woman shrugged.

“Then leave it when you’re done.” She pointed to the bell sitting on the counter. “Ring if you need me, okay?” She smiled again when he nodded and disappeared back down the aisles. Did adults always smile this much? Eddie couldn’t remember any adult in Derry ever smiling at him and his friends—though that could have been because wherever they went, trouble tended to follow.

Eddie pulled the topmost paper from off the stack and looked down.

The Hawkins Post. Friday, March 13th, 1985.

Whoa.

If Eddie hadn’t already begun to feel lightheaded, this would have definitely done it.

He was in the fucking past. In *Indiana*, of all places.

He’d never been to Indiana—hell, he’d never been west of Cleveland or south of the Mason Dixon line. He felt a hysterical laugh hitch quietly in the back of his throat.

His stomach clenched and the world started to spin, and he instinctively threw out a hand to grip at the counter. His hand knocked into the bell, and a mere moment later Joyce had reappeared, looking concerned.

“You okay, hun?”

Eddie kept a white-knuckled grip on the counter, and tried to breathe normally.

“Do you have a bathroom I could use?”

She frowned, “It’s not for— yes, of course, follow me,” he staggered behind her, paper still clutched in his grip. She led him through a door that said EMPLOYEES ONLY and down a short hallway. “In here, go ahead,”

Eddie dove for the toilet, barely having time to slam the door behind him before he was heaving. The stomach acid burned his throat, but everything that came up was clear—can't get rid of what you didn't have.

He hated vomiting. He always thought it was because of his freshman year roommate at NYU, who would spend an hour monopolizing their bathroom every morning after a party, subjecting Eddie to the sound of his gag reflex working overtime. But now he could remember the first time he'd ever seen Richie get sick; they'd been eight, sitting in Mrs. McClane's third grade class, working on subtraction problems with little blue and yellow blocks to provide a visual aid. Eddie fully expected Richie to use the blocks to spell out something he wasn't allowed to say, or make some gross picture, but his best friend had been quiet ever since lunch. Suddenly Richie shot up and ran to the nearest trash can, throwing up loudly like he was making a point.

The other kids in class started shrieking their “ews” and yelling for the teacher, but Eddie just rushed over and put his hand on Richie's back, the way his mom did for him when his tummy didn't feel good. Richie glanced up at him miserably, eyes glazed and cheeks rosy.

“Sorry Eddie.”

Even though his brain was chanting *'SICK SICK SICK'*, Eddie decided he hated seeing his best friend in pain.

Richie went home early that day and was out for the next two with the flu. On the third day Eddie brought his missed homework to the Tozier's, Richie's fever had broken and Eddie was allowed to quickly say hi. Richie had been curled up on the couch in the den, swaddled in blankets and munching on some crackers. Thundercats played quietly in the background. He'd lit up when Eddie came into the room.

“All righty-o now, dearest Edsington.” He'd crowed in the new British accent he'd taken to doing after Went showed him *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *“Took my temperature and everything. I was a good patient, you'd be proud.”* Eddie was a little suspect, given the patches of pink that were still a little visible on Richie's cheeks.

"Don't do it again." He'd said stubbornly, "You scared me half to death."

Richie shrugged, still smiling. *"I'll try. Thanks for helping me in class."*

Eddie shrugged too, but felt warm inside.

Vaguely, adult but also 13-year-old Eddie wondered how many other times Richie had been sick in the 27 years they'd spent apart, and how many other people might have been there to rub his back, or hold back his hair.

2. Escape Artist

Joyce was concerned about the boy in the bathroom.

Call it a mother's intuition, but she'd felt something... off, about him from the minute he walked in. The fact that he wasn't wearing a coat in early March was concerning enough—spring did *not* come quickly in rural Indiana— but he'd been white as a sheet when she came to check on the bell. She wasn't supposed to let customers into the back, but her instincts had kicked in and was she just supposed to let this kid hurl all over the floor?

Those big brown eyes, the floppy chestnut hair... well, sue her if he didn't remind her of her own boys back home. He looked like he could be around Will's age.

She was tempted to walk back there and check on him. She'd left some snacks, a few granola bars and a bottle of water, to help his stomach—it was fine, Don didn't have to know and if Jeff brought it up she'd gently remind him of all the times she'd looked the other way when packs of cigarettes and batteries got “stolen by those pesky local kids.”

She hoped he ate.

She wondered how he'd gotten hurt.

She tried to remember if she'd ever seen him before.

The door jingled, and Joyce was forced to put her worries in the back of her mind and caked on a customer service smile.

“Hi Denise—”

xxx

Eddie stared at his reflection in the mirror.

Jesus.

He didn't know how long he spent crouched over the toilet bowl in the employees-only restroom of the general store in downtown Hawkins, fucking Indiana, but it felt like a lifetime. (Whatever that meant these days, considering he had the brain of a 40-year-old in what was apparently 1985, and up until earlier today he'd been pretty sure his lifetime was over.) His stomach was still achy, but a few of the granola bars that had been left outside the door had helped—he'd been relieved to see they were all still sealed in their packaging.

He'd gone to wash his hands—god knew what had been living on that floor, bathrooms were a fucking petri dish of disease—when he finally got a look at himself in the mirror hanging above the sink.

He looked... well, he looked like a fucking thirteen year old kid with a gnarly scar on the left side of his face.

Okay, maybe it wasn't *that* bad. He hadn't been wrong when he'd realized there was no hole in his cheek anymore; the skin seemed to have healed back together relatively well, and the scar tissue wasn't red and puckered like he'd expected. It was still noticeable—there was a two inch or so line of raised skin that was a slightly darker color than his regular complexion. But it looked like something he'd had for a few weeks, or months even, not just a few hours.

He'd been stabbed in the face and then less than twelve hours later he'd been dead.

What a day.

He wet his hands in the sink and tried to use the water to pat down his hair into something manageable, that didn't make him look like he'd been lying in the dirt for god knows how long. Once he was satisfied—he still looked like a scrawny kid, but not much could be done about that—he looked around for paper towels, but only found an ancient looking hand dryer that he would NOT be touching thank you very much.

Cringing, he trailed his wet hands down the front of his shirt just to

get the excess water off. As he passed over his chest, he felt uneven ground near his sternum.

His breath hitched, eyes wide.

No. Nope. No no no no no, no fucking way in hell.

But why wouldn't it be there? The scar on his face was still there, healing or not. Why would he think his mortal blow would be any different?

Eddie was... brave—*brave enough to kill a clown?*—"you're braver than you think" – but he was also tired. And overwhelmed. And so, so, so not ready to go there.

He looked to the door. Joyce had been gone a while, but he couldn't stay here forever.

xxx

When she'd said her goodbyes to the last customer of the rush, Joyce snuck back to check on the boy. The snacks she'd left outside the door were gone, so that was a good sign—hopefully eating would calm whatever was upsetting his stomach. She knocked lightly on the door, trying not to startle him.

"You okay in there?"

The only response was silence.

"You need me to call anyone?"

Nothing.

"Kid?" She pushed down on the handle, expecting resistance. It was unlocked. She hesitated a moment, all the same. "I'm coming in."

But there was no one to protest, because there was no one there.

The back entrance of the store had been simple enough to find, and thankfully didn't have any kind of alarm on it.

Christ the 80's were such a shit show. He wiped sweat from his upper lip—the rush of adrenaline always made him a little sweaty. *A fucking risk management nightmare. Anyone could walk in and rob that place blind.*

He'd power walked as quickly and inconspicuously as possible in the opposite direction of the store (*it's fine it's fine it's fine DON'T LOOK BACK it's fine you're fine everything's fine*) up two blocks and around a corner. He tucked himself in the first alley he saw, across from a movie theater that could have rivaled the Aladdin playing *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Malibu Express*.

And, well, the newspaper was still clutched in his hands. He hadn't been intending to steal it, but he hadn't been planning on spending the better part of the afternoon praying to the porcelain gods, either. Besides, he'd barely gotten to look at it, and the idea of going any further on zero information was starting to make him panicky.

The alley wasn't his ideal spot, but it was deserted and the area didn't seem to have a bunch of people late in the afternoon. It was also far enough from Melvald's that he wasn't as worried about that weird Joyce lady coming to look for him. So he crouched down against a wall, plugged his nose against the faint ode de dumpster, and unfolded the paper.

An hour later Eddie was hot and smelly and over everything about this day. He didn't feel like he'd learned much, other than Hawkins was another small town in the middle of nowhere the most exciting thing was a new mall that was set to open in May. There was mention of a strange crop scare the previous fall, and some growing concern that the mall might hurt small businesses, but no murders, no missing kids, no conveniently placed mass deaths spaced 27 years

apart.

Wouldn't have that been too fucking convenient. Stupid clown does the same shit for centuries and suddenly now he wants a new schtick? He leaned his head back against the building behind him, letting the chilly brick soothe him. Guess we're going to have to do this the hard way.

Probably involving a library. Not for the first time today he wished Mike or Ben were here—they practically got off on all the research. He'd take any of the Losers, actually, if just to be able to look at someone else and say, *"this is fucking crazy, right?"*

The sky was dusky, littered with purple clouds in the fading light, and Eddie still needed to figure out a place to sleep. He couldn't go back to Joyce after stealing from the store—if the police got involved he was screwed, and somehow he couldn't see the turtle popping up to post bail anytime soon—and he didn't know anyone else in this godforsaken town. He stood, folding the paper carefully and tucking it under his arm, before closing his eyes and centering himself.

Shelter.

The pull manifested in his gut and Eddie took a step back out onto the sidewalk...

... only to get absolutely *bodied* by someone's bike.

"Jesus FUCK!"

xxx

"I'm so sorry I'm so sorry holy shit are you okay—"

Eddie gritted his teeth against the stinging pain in his palms and knees from where he'd hit the pavement, and the pressure of watery film building up against his eyes. He was already a skinny little runt and he was *not* going to cry.

“Shut the fuck up!” He barked from the ground, “Do you even watch where you’re going or do you usually just plow through random passers-by like it’s fucking *Grand Theft Auto*?”

“What the hell is—hey it’s not my fault you fucking came out of nowhere!”

“It’s the sidewalk, it’s for walking!”

He stumbled to his feet and hissed when it irritated his palms. The skin on his right palm was torn and he could see the blood starting to well, while the left just had those little white streaks where the skin had started to rip. When he was a kid he always thought they looked like skid marks from race cars.

“Shit, are your hands okay?”

The kid at least had the decency to sound contrite. He had chubby cheeks and curly brown hair and wore a red, white and blue hat that reminded Eddie of a trucker. “I might have some band aids—” He pulled a backpack off his back awkwardly, as he was still sitting mostly on his bike.

Eddie’s instinct was to run while the other boy was distracted, but... these scratches were going to hurt like a bitch later if he didn’t get them covered. He didn’t even want to *think* about all the germs he had already been exposed to.

“For the record I usually ride on the street, but my mom wants me to ride on the sidewalks when I’m in town since she thinks there are more cars.” The other boy didn’t look up from where he’d practically stuffed his face in his bag, “I don’t usually even come this way after school, but she needed something from the pharmacy—AHA!” He held up a triumphant fist, in it a couple of small white packages. “Here,” He turned and opened the fist to present them.

“... thanks.” Eddie said quietly, shifting to grab them with his non-bleeding hand. It took him a second to realize that the other boy was staring at him, and he recoiled a little. “What?”

“Dude, your *face*!”

“Dude, your *teeth*.” Or lack thereof, but by the face the other boy made, he knew Eddie was referring to.

“Look asshole, it’s called cleidocranial dysplasia and it—”

“—affects the growth of bones and teeth. Yeah dipshit, I know.”

That seemed to shut the kid up. Eddie picked up the newspaper from where it landed when he fell, pleased to see his knees didn’t seem to have had suffered the same fate as his right palm.

“Hey are you new? I’ve never seen you before, and I know I’d remember a scar like that—”

Eddie ran.

xxx

Okay, so it wasn’t his finest moment, but it wasn’t as bad as the company Christmas party six years ago when he’d practically climbed over his own cubicle to escape the ladies from accounting who were dead set on putting him in a Santa costume.

By the time Eddie’s legs and his gut had led him back to the woods, it was near dark. His muscles were screaming as he slowed, not used to the strain, but he put himself through the deep breathing exercises he learned and it felt like it helped, maybe, a little.

I could have run track. In high school, in college. I probably could have even gotten a scholarship. This wasn’t a new train of thought. Eddie was a natural born runner and Sonia must have known it, because she cut off those dreams before they could even take root in his young mind with imaginary asthma and deadly, made-up lung conditions. She knew she’d have to do it to keep him, or he would have run right out of that house and out of her clutches, forever.

He walked down a dirt path similar to the one he’d been on this morning—but not the same one, his gut told him they were further

south than that—until his feet took him off it, through the trees again. His sweat had started to cool when he came upon it.

Shelter.

It wasn't a house. It wasn't really even a shed. It was a fucking *shanty* in the middle of the woods, a bunch of dead tree branches covering some tarp and a massive American flag coming out the top. In the fading light he could see a sign nailed to the front of it—well, signs.

CASTLE BYERS, and above it, HOME OF WILL THE WISE.

And another, slightly to the side.

ALL FRIENDS WELCOME.

“Can I b-b-be your f-f-f—”

“Friend?”

A smile. Relief.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m Eddie.”

“B-Bill.”

He wished Bill were with him now. Bill would know what to do with all this insanity. Even though they hadn't seen each other in twenty-seven years, as soon as he saw laid eyes on him in the Jade of the Orient, he knew he still trusted the other man implicitly.

Eddie crept closer to the fort-like structure and pushed aside the thin piece of cloth covering the entrance that clearly was someone's old sheets.

Gross.

Inside was dark, but Eddie managed to find a kerosene lamp that had seen better days. He turned it up, pleased to find some oil still left in it, and turned to survey his surroundings. There were old duvet

covers and blankets stacked on a pallet to one side, and a bunch of other random things—was that a *microscope*?—laying around. But the interesting part was the drawings that were thumbtacked to the branches holding up the fort from the inside.

Some of them were clearly made by someone very young—stick figures at best—but many of them were elaborate, and dark. Pictures of great, black shadows and grotesque, animal-like creatures with flowers for faces—and the central figure, a boy with short brown hair and big brown eyes. The boy went in and out of the pictures; sometimes he was with others, sometimes he was alone, and in one really disturbing picture, he was wearing a hospital gown and screaming, choking on a dark, thick smoke. The strokes were quick and fierce, like someone had made them in a fit, the page covered in black marker and colored pencil.

Okay Hawkins, Indiana. Eddie un-tacked that particular drawing from the branch, letting his hand trace over it. This frantic madness felt eerily familiar.

What are you hiding?

xxx

In the months that Eleven had been out of hiding—from her friends, from *Mike*—she hadn't needed to use her powers nearly as much. She got to talk to Mike almost everyday on the phone (which was WAY better than having to watch him, knowing he couldn't hear her), and he and her friends were allowed to come over sometimes. They were still working up to her being able to go and hang out with them at outside places, but Jim had made some mumblings about "maybe with a curfew", so she was hopeful for the summer, when the weather was nice and her friends weren't in school all day.

Something was different about today.

She'd felt it as soon as she woke up—a crackling of energy under her

skin. The air in the woods was quiet, but not peaceful the way it had been since Christmas.

“Like the calm before the storm.” Jim had said, staring out the window with her. Jim was a gruffly man, but he had good instincts. It made him a good chief of police, and a good dad.

But nothing had been different, on the outside. Jim went to work and she practiced reading and writing until she got bored, then she watched TV and waited for her friends to be done with school. Max called in the afternoon and they talked about something dumb Lucas did and Mike came over for dinner—Mike was not allowed to come over when Jim wasn’t there, which El didn’t totally get. (She thought it probably had something to do with kissing, which they’d done a few times since the Snowball, but not nearly as much as she wanted.)

Now, alone in her room, El tied a scarf around her head and let herself slip away, into the void. Her feet plodded through the dark water, and for a moment all seemed quiet. Then, a distinct sound of *slurping*.

She turned, only to see a man, bent at the waist and kneeling on the ground. He had dark hair and was wearing grey pants and suspenders over a white shirt. She took a step closer, trying to see what he was crouched so closely over, when suddenly he turned and looked straight at her.

“Hello child.”

“Who are you?” His eyes almost seemed like they were glowing. It was hard to look away, but she forced herself to look at his mouth, which was covered in blood.

“You may call me Robert.”

She emerged from the void screaming.

Notes for the Chapter:

I've never written something that has actually gotten away from me as much as this has, so screw my outline I guess.

Title is from the Thirty Seconds to Mars song, "Kings and Queens".

3. You Give Me Fever

“—thought she heard a bear—”

“—was the last time you saw bear out here?”

“Maybe they’re coming out of hibernation?”

Jonathan laughed, and Will felt his face break out into a smile. He usually loved these moments, just him and his brother, listening to music or romping through the woods like when they were younger. For a long time they’d only ever really had each other, and even though Will had the Party, and now Jonathan was dating Nancy, he found he loved his big brother even more fiercely than before. But he’d felt off since yesterday, and the usually comforting rush of the wind through the tree leaves made something under his skin itch.

They walked by Chester’s grave towards Castle Byers, and Will was filled with a confusing rush of affection and longing, looking at his old fort. He and Jonathan had built it and their mom had provided the blankets and bedding he knew sat inside; it used to be his favorite place, when he felt like the weight of the world was starting to cave in around him. In the Upside Down, he’d spent hours hiding here, feeling like a piece of his family was still protecting him.

Will didn’t really come out here as much these days. Max usually wanted to go to the arcade, and where Max went, Lucas and Dustin were sure to follow. When Mike wasn’t visiting El, he wanted to talk about her, and would ask Will to help him analyze her every word and expression. (Will didn’t know how to tell his friend that El grew up in a lab and probably didn’t have enough experience with human interaction yet to be sending him messages through her eyebrows.)

He liked El and Max, he did, even though he hadn’t spent extended time with either of them. It’s just... was it a crime that sometimes he missed when it was just the four of them, playing DnD in the basement or having sleepovers in a busted up fort in the woods?

“Look,” Jonathan called from a few yards away, and Will turned to see a fox and its kits staring at them from atop a dead tree trunk.

They stood for a few seconds before dodging back into the underbrush, leaves rustling noisily as they went. “They probably got close to the house last night.”

“That would be a lot of noise for a few foxes,” He responded, hand drifting up to the back of his neck. He’d gone to the nurse at school, and she’d said nothing was wrong, but Will knew that wasn’t necessarily the case. Jonathan’s face went from contemplative to worried.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah. Yeah I’m fine.” Will drifted closer to the entrance of Castle Byers, and the sheet that flopped ominously in the wind. His skin was buzzing. Something was coming?

“Will?”

He pulled back the curtain.

Nothing seemed out of place, at first glance. The bedding was mussed where it sat on the pallet, drawings tacked up and his various knick-knacks strewn about. It was only because this place was Will’s—*Home of Will the Wise*—and he knew it as intimately as any piece of his heart that he could pick out what didn’t belong. An empty water bottle resting on the ground and a newspaper, crumpled like someone had been holding onto it very tightly.

Something wasn’t coming.

Something was *here*.

xxx

As a rule, Eddie was a light sleeper.

It wasn’t just because of the anxiety he’d grown up with, or the nightmares that had plagued him long before that summer of 1989

(though those things certainly didn't help).

Once he'd woken up in the middle of the night to his mother standing next to his bed, one hand reaching towards him, the other holding a pillow. He kept his body as still as possible, but grabbed her by her outstretched wrist. She shrieked in surprise, dropping the pillow and collapsing to the floor. Eddie didn't know if he physically couldn't move or his brain just didn't want him to, so he remained still until she collected herself and slunk back out of his room. The door clicked shut quietly behind her.

They didn't talk about it the next morning, but she never did it again.

He leaned his head back against the tree that was supporting him, relieved to hear the rustle of footsteps and conversation slowly fade into the distance. He'd slept like shit last night after cleaning his cuts with the last of the water Joyce had left for him and slapping on Trucker-boy's bandaids. (When he'd realized they were Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle themed, he'd looked very pointedly upward, "that is not *fucking* funny.") He'd tossed and turned, drifting in and out of nightmares and night sweats (was it normal for Indiana to be this hot in March?) until the early morning, when he gave up and stared at the drawing he'd plucked off the wall in the dim, bluish light.

It wasn't long after that he'd heard distant voices and bolted from the fort, drawing still in hand. With a low hiss as the rough material rubbed across his hands, he folded it and put it in his fanny pack.

His palms hurt. His brow was wet with sweat. His stomach had become a dull, throbbing ache.

Eddie started to walk.

xxx

"—keep the doors locked, and no boys, okay?"

“Not even Mike?”

“What—no, definitely not Mike—”

Jim was looking at her strangely.

“You gonna be okay?”

El shrugged, still not used to talking about her feelings but not wanting to lie. Saturdays were usually reserved for movie marathons (Jim liked what he called “spaghetti westerns”, which didn’t really make sense to El because no one was eating spaghetti as far as she could tell) and spending time together, but Jim had been called in to work due to some neighborhood vandalism. He was hesitant to leave, understandably; he’d held her when she’d ripped herself out of the void screaming the night before, let her shake in his arms until exhausted, she fell into a dreamless sleep.

She woke up sluggish, her head throbbing and her stomach threatening to turn if she moved too quickly. El thought this must be what it meant to be “hung over.”

“I can call out, tell ‘em it’s an emergency—”

She shook her head, wincing a little when she could feel her brain rattle around.

“No, go. I’m okay.” Jim didn’t look fully convinced, but he put his hat on. He was still wearing his thick winter coat, even though he’d talked about asking Joyce to help him buy El some spring and summer clothes.

“Call Joyce if you need anything, alright? The number’s by the phone.”

He ruffled her hair and she made a familiar sound of displeasure, but it made him smile in the way that made her heart warm. Then he was gone.

She set about making Eggos, using her powers to zap the radio to her favorite station. Her powers had been getting stronger ever since she’d closed the Gate a second time and reunited with her friends;

she didn't even bleed for the little things anymore. She wondered if she'd been this happy at the lab, if Papa could have made her into the living weapon he'd wanted.

Not Papa. She scolded herself, *Dr. Brenner.*

She was halfway through dribbling syrup onto a stack of freezer waffles three high when the air changed, and a strange but tingling spread under her skin. As slowly as she could manage with her blood humming in her veins, she put the maple syrup down and walked to the door. It swung open as she willed it. She almost expected to see a man with glowing eyes and blood on his mouth.

Instead, standing a few yards away from the stairs, she saw a boy.

xxx

The sun had begun to hide behind a thick layer of cloud cover by the time he came upon the cabin. It felt hard to be aware of anything, all his energy put towards placing one foot in front of the other.

And god, it was so *fucking hot*. He'd unsnapped the fanny pack from around his chest, unable to stand how the dense material felt pushing against his skin. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and he'd almost taken it off before he remembered the gruesome truth of what lay underneath.

He'd stopped once, when the fort was no longer in sight, and just stood with his eyes closed, trying not to hurl. The breeze felt nice on his skin. He swayed a little too far to one side and just barely caught himself, when he heard the voice of a thirteen-year-old he never thought he'd be capable of forgetting.

Not copping out on me, are ya Eds?

He struggled to open his eyes, inhaling sharply, "Richie?"

An extra cold gust of wind hit mercilessly, but to his burning body it

felt like heaven.

You have to keep walking, loverboy.

Eddie nearly whimpered. He finally managed to crack his eyes open, but he was still alone in this strange woods, in this strange world.

“You’re not real,” he gasped, mouth dry, “you’re not here.”

Of course it’s happening inside your head, Harry, but why should that mean it’s not real?

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. Of course if he was going crazy, it would be Richie’s voice taking him there. If a few tears escaped their confinement, he’d never tell.

“I bet you’ve read all those—”

Eds! I’m appalled, I’ll have you know I’ve never read a book a day in my life—

He laughed again but it was barely more than a breathy exhalation.

Come on Eds—miles to go before you sleep and all that.

“Don’t leave—Don’t leave me alone.” Eddie whispered, toes curling as another wave of heat threatened to knock him to the ground.

I’m here. Now come on, shortstack, up and at ‘em.

Another breeze hit him, and for a moment Eddie let himself indulge in the fantasy that Richie was pressing cool hands to his cheeks and blowing lightly on his forehead the way Maggie Tozier used to do for them, trying to relieve the fire coursing its way through his blood.

He’d kept walking, the Richie-in-his-mind chattering every once in a while, but the things he said got more nonsensical as his fevered brain began to mix imagination and memory. It was hard for Eddie to follow, trying to focus on walking and breathing at the same time, but the lilt and tone of his best friend’s voice was comforting all the same.

He came upon the cabin by accident, really—it was sort of hidden, camouflaged by the brown remnants of winter around it. He wasn't even planning on approaching, but Richie's voice had gone silent as soon as he'd laid eyes on it and his gut set his legs moving before his brain caught up. He'd almost set off a trip wire between two trees, and then narrowly avoided at least two more by the time he reached the stairs.

Suddenly the door opened, and he stumbled back. Through the doorframe stepped a girl, with short brown hair that fell around her ears like it couldn't decide if it wanted to be curly or not. She wore an oversized t-shirt and sweatpants, probably pajamas. God, what time was it?

"What are you doing here?" Her words were a little stilted, but her voice was clear.

"Who are you?"

"I live here." A wave of heat crashed through his body, and Eddie swayed. The girl made an alarmed sound, stepping forward. "Are you okay?"

He waited for the nausea and lightheadedness to pass. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

That seemed to make the girl pause, and she considered Eddie for a long moment.

God I must look so pathetic.

"Do you like Eggos?"

xxx

Even sitting at her kitchen table, the boy looked like he was going to fall over any moment.

The closer he got, the more she felt the charged sensation under her skin begin to sting, so she'd tried to keep a few feet between them as he'd scaled the stairs and entered the cabin. She'd pushed her own plate in front of him and gotten him a glass of water—he'd guzzled it down so quickly she just quietly set out two more cups full— before retreating to lean against the counter near the stove.

He looked... bad. The area under his eyes was dark, like Jim's when he didn't sleep at night, and his skin was pale except for where it was very red and patchy on his face. There was a big cut on his cheek, but no blood. He was also sweating a lot, even though when she'd stepped out onto the porch, she'd shivered in the cold morning air.

He was also staring at the waffles like he didn't know what to do with them.

"Eat." She tried to help, pointing at the plate. Maybe he'd never had Eggos before?

He frowned, unsure. "Do you know how many preservatives are in those?"

El didn't know what "pre-serve-ah-teeves" were, but she shrugged. "Tastes good."

"That's because there's nothing found in nature in them." The boy mumbled, but picked up a knife and fork and started to try and cut the waffles. His eyebrows did that push-together thing that Jim's did, and she noticed his hands had bandaids on them.

"Need help?" That seemed to be the wrong thing to ask, because he just instantly glared at her.

"I'm not a *baby*," he bit back, even as his left hand twitched and he dropped his fork onto the cabin floor.

Neither of them said anything for a moment, and then the boy dropped his head and sucked in a few shaky breaths. El quietly got another fork from the drawer and pulled the plate and knife towards her. She cut the waffles up the way Jim had taught her, into squares, before pushing the plate back and holding the fork out.

“Not baby, just help.”

The boy looked up at the fork, then at her, his gaze tired. He reached out and took it, before stabbing a few pieces of Eggo and shoving them in his mouth.

She thought she might have heard a “yeah, thanks” somewhere in there, and it made her smile a little bit. “What’s your name?”

He paused, before digging back in for another big bite. “Eddie.”

She pointed to herself. “Jane.” It gave her a little shiver of excitement to introduce herself by her new name, the one she was going to be able to use when she was a real person and didn’t have to worry about the lab anymore.

He grunted in response and she watched him eat for a little while, trying to work through the humming sensation under her skin. It wasn’t warning her of outright evil, the way it had done with the Demogorgon. It was a little more like when she stood close to the Gate, and could feel the power and possibility of a thousand dimensions only a step away. Terrifying in its infinity and straining against its worldly form.

The feeling Eddie gave her was sort of that. Crackly, like he was one plug away from blowing the circuits. But there was something else too.... something she’d felt before, but couldn’t put her finger on exactly where.

She was brought out of her thoughts by the soft screech of the chair against the wood as Eddie stood and made to take his empty plate and silverware to the sink. He was still kind of sweaty, but he seemed steadier on his feet than when she’d let him in.

“You want to sleep?”

He paused, his eyes still a little unsure, but nodded. El nodded back and crossed the floor of the cabin to her room, waiting for him to follow.

“I can sleep on the couch—” He started to protest when he saw where she was leading him, but she shook her head.

"It's okay. Here." If Jim came home and saw a strange boy sleeping on the couch before she could explain, he'd be mad and she didn't think he'd want to help Eddie if he was mad. She went to the small closet right outside the door and grabbed a couple blankets no one really used. He was sitting on the bed already when she walked back in, the funny little bag he'd been carrying since he arrived placed on the floor, "You can sleep on these."

His mouth twitched up and then back down, and it reminded her of Will a little. "Thank you, Jane." Eddie reached out to take them from her when their hands brushed, and she had only a moment to register the pain in her head, lightning through her skull, before she fell to her knees.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Eddie gasped, scrambling onto her bed, away from her. She groaned—suddenly everything was too much, too big, too loud, and it felt like someone was stabbing a pencil through her eye to the back of her brain. She hid her face in between her knees until the pain subsided enough that the light wasn't going to make her sick.

Eddie was slumped unconscious across her bed. El stood on shaky legs, tossed the fallen blankets over him and retreated to the living room, closing the door quietly behind her.

xxx

Eddie woke up to something burning.

His eyes snapped open, heart racing when he found his vision obscured by a faint haze. He threw himself out of the bed—he didn't remember laying down, didn't remember falling asleep—and towards the door, ready to shout for the girl, to tell her—

"Thank you, Jane." And then pain.

He'd hurt her. He hadn't meant to. But whatever freak of nature thing was happening to him, it had hurt the nice, strange girl in the woods

who hadn't asked any questions but had given him food and a place to rest his head.

She probably hated him.

Tears pricked his eyes, and he stepped back away from the door.

He turned back around, and his eyes finally catching the source of the smoke. The blankets on the bed he'd been asleep in were burned black in an indeterminate shape, the corners singed and in some places unrecognizable. He stepped closer, and one part that had been simply smoking burst into a small flame.

Panicked, he grabbed the nearest pillow he could reach and beat the flames down until they went out, gasping as his body protested the movement. Then he stopped.

The pillow was covered in black singed fabric—a large piece where his head had rested, and now two handprints on either side where he held it.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, please—

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't—he needed air, needed to get out--

Scaling the small bookshelf against the wall, Eddie pushed aside the curtains and unlocked the window.

xxx

He didn't know how far he got, didn't know if the girl—*Jane*—was following him, or even if she'd realized he'd gone. Didn't know if she'd care to, given that he'd basically *assaulted* her and somehow nearly *burned her fucking house down*.

His foot caught on a root and pulled painfully, sending him crashing into the dead leaves and debris covering the forest floor.

He wanted to curl up into a ball as agony struck through him, but his body didn't respond. Maybe this body wasn't even his to begin with. Stolen property.

How am I supposed to save anyone when I can't even save myself?

Maybe there was another Eddie who was supposed to have been given this second chance. Who hadn't so royally fucked over his first life that he deserved another try.

I'm not the hero you think I am.

He was just a guy who'd died, killed by his own fears and failings.

Twice.

I'm sorry, Richie. I tried.

I'm sorry.

xxx

Under Eddie Kaspbrak's outstretched hand, thin tendrils of smoke started to rise.

Notes for the Chapter:

("Save the children" she said, writing 3k words of pure suffering.)

On another note, I know many of us use AO3 and fanfiction to escape our everyday lives for a short time, but I can't in good conscience pretend that what is happening in the world around us is not happening.

Black people matter. Black readers matter. Black writers matter. Black artists, Black actors, Black

directors, Black production members, Black fans--none of the things you love today would exist in the same way without the presence and contribution of Black folk, and they are deserving of your accolades and appreciation for their work.

I encourage you, if you are able to engage in any of the protesting, whether it be marching in the streets or making calls or sending emails or donating to causes or simply making intentional purchases from Black-owned businesses local to you, please do. Even something as small as engaging in a conversation with a friend, loved one or neighbor who does not understand/ is angry about what is happening is a start. Together we can build a better, safer future for all of us.

If you have a problem with any of this, or it turns you off from reading my writing, then goodbye. Negative or unproductive comments regarding this statement will be deleted. This is not a debate.

Stay as safe as you can, my friends. I'll see you next time.

4. Baptism by Fire

The “neighborhood vandalism” had been some kids taking spray paint to an old brick wall that Helen Johansson *swore* was technically part of her property, even though she’d been crabbing about knocking it down for years.

“Now you have a reason to.” Hopper tried to assuage her. Actually personally he thought the piece—a blue and yellow nuclear bombesque explosion—looked kind of cool. Helen did not agree, and it wasn’t until he said he’d file a police report if it bothered her that much that she stopped looking quite so red in the face.

He swung by the station to drop off the paperwork, eager to get back to the cabin and check on his kid. She’d been through a lot, but he didn’t often see her quite as rattled as she’d been the night before, and it left a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Cal Powell waved from his desk when he walked in, munching on a donut. “Helen Johansson give you hell?”

“I think she and Eleanor Gillespie are trying to start a club for it.” He mumbled back, making the other man chuckle. “Any coffee left?”

“Nah, I drank it all in my contemplation.” Powell grinned, knowingly sipping from a mug. Usually Hopper’d give him shit for it, but he knew how much Saturday shifts sucked, so he’d give it to him this time.

He’d only been seated in his office, signing the last of Helen Johansson’s dumb vandalism report, for a few minutes when his deputy came in and leaned against doorframe.

“Chester Jenkins just called in— said he saw smoke coming from the woods.”

“So send it on to the fire department.” Hopper paused, “Wait, did he say where?”

“North of Lancashire, I think—”

He knocked the his chair over with how quickly he stood. “How far north?”

“I don’t know, maybe a coupla miles? Hey Chief, you okay—”

But Hopper was already back out the door.

xxx

Joyce smiled as Jonathan pulled the car away, Will sticking his hands out the window to keep waving until they were out of sight. She waved back, trying to rear back the creature in her chest that screeched at the thought of her babies leaving her sight. It had started when she thought Will was gone forever, and only grew when she realized what was still inside him, trying to control him. When they’d had to almost kill him to save him.

Why does it always have to come down to life death with us?

Maybe other mothers would have locked up their kids after the shit they’d gone through, kept them safe and home and never let the big bad world near them again.

But Joyce wasn’t most mothers.

She knew, as crazy as their world already was, it wasn’t going to get any nicer, and she wouldn’t be doing her kids any good by coddling them. Keeping them home, away from their friends—away from the other people who loved them—was just going to make them all miserable.

Besides, everyone knew Joyce Byers’ boys were fighters. Even Will.

Especially Will.

She pulled out her pack of Camel Lights from her back pocket, lighting one and sucking in in one smooth motion. She’d told Jonathan she was going to try and quit—he’d been on her about her

health again, twice as often as before their life had been thrown into this chaos—but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. It was only her second one of the morning.

Bob had wanted her to quit, too. She thought she would have tried for him, maybe even would have gotten some of those fancy patches he'd mentioned to her—

The phone rang.

Tucking the cig between two fingers, she walked back inside and plucked the phone (the third one in two years) from its cradle.

“Byers residen—”

“Joyce?” The voice was young and panicked. Joyce was instantly on alert.

“El? Honey is that you?”

“Joyce, come here please—”

“Are you okay? Where are you?”

“Home, I'm home, I need—Jim said call you—”

“What's going on? Are you in danger?”

“There's—” a crashing noise cut her off, and some scuffled banging, like she'd dropped the phone. All the hair on Joyce's body stood on end.

“Stay put, I'm coming, I'm coming—”

xxx

El ran, barefoot, towards the orange glow in the distance. Birds chattered, fleeing from the encroaching flames, and animals she normally never saw in the woods skittered away from the

encroaching heat. Trees were flying past, but she barely noticed, unable to get big brown eyes out of her head.

I don't have anywhere else to go.

I'm not a baby.

Thank you, Jane.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry—

She didn't know him, really. All she knew was when she woke up and he was gone, there'd been an empty feeling in her chest. And that when she'd smelled the burning and seen the smoke, she'd known without a doubt where he'd be.

She got as close as she dared, squinting to try and make out a figure through the brightness of the flames and the thickness of the smoke.

“EDDIE! EDDIE!”

Anything she might have heard in response was drowned out by a large crack as a flaming branch began to come down right above her. Instinctually she threw a hand up, suspending it in the air. It felt strange—warm, like her hand was inches from the fire rather than yards from it—and the flames seemed to dim the longer she held it there, until it was nothing more than scorched wood. Her eyes widened.

“EL!”

A car door slammed in the distance. She turned dropped the branch and turned, expecting to see Joyce, but she heaved a desperate sigh of relief.

Jim was there, coming after her.

xxx

She was standing too close to the fire, of COURSE she was standing too close to the fire, of fucking course—

“JIM!” She threw her arms around him and Hopper instantly picked her up and swung her over his shoulder, making her shriek.

“NO NO NO!”

He didn’t stop, making it several yards away from the *active fire blazing behind them*, but then there was a sharp tug on his ear and he *howled*.

“The FUCK—” He dropped her and she instantly turned back to run towards the blaze, “STOP! EL!”

He followed her until she reached the edge again, his hands landing on her shoulders in a vice grip. The heat this close was dizzying “What the hell is *wrong* with you, kid?”

“I can stop it!”

“You can—what? No, we have to go!”

Hopper jumped when she shrieked in frustration, a sound that didn’t happen often. “Help him!”

“Help who—” He followed her arm, pointing towards the blaze. “There’s a *person* in there?”

“Needs help,” she coughed, smoke suddenly filling their direction as the wind changed, “I helped before but, needs more.”

“Okay, I don’t even know if I want to know what that means,” he argued, “the fire department will be here soon—”

She shook her head, eyes wild “No time!”

She was right, but he didn’t know how to tell her that whoever she thought was at the center of the blaze was most likely already dead.

“Jim,” she said, reading his hesitation correctly. She tapped her arm, where the numbers that had changed his and so many other lives sat,

faded but still visible against her pale skin.

011

“Like me,” she pointed to the flames, “he’s like me.”

She looked up at him, this little thing he’d found scavenging for Eggos in the woods, who’d never had anyone who loved her; who he’d brought into his house and who’d made it a home again after so long. He knew he’d walk through hell for this girl, again and again.

He just didn’t think it would be quite so literal.

“You can hold it off?”

El responded by raising her hand and aiming it at the nearest patch of fire, which shuddered and dimmed considerably. He huffed, impressed.

“Handy.” She smiled a little, bringing up her other hand, and the smoking patch of land expanded into something just large enough that he could walk through. Hopper took a step forward before he looked back at her.

“Stay here—no matter what.” She gave him a pained look.

“Jim—”

“No buts. No matter what happens, you don’t step foot in this.”

She rolled her eyes, annoyed, but nodded. A telltale bit of blood was already starting to drip from her nose.

She’s gonna be a teenager so soon, Christ.

And he stepped into the flames.

xxx

Like a hurricane, the fire had an eye of the storm.

Following the path El laid out for him, Hopper wove through the burning woods, narrowly avoiding falling debris and covering his mouth to avoid inhaling too much smoke. His eyes watering made it hard to see, and he almost tripped a few times when the path suddenly zig-zagged, but he trusted her—he was trying to show her that, these days—to steer him true.

He was sweating through his shirt and his lungs were starting to strain when he stumbled into a blackened clearing, almost a perfect circle. And in the center, facedown in the dirt, was the unmistakable body of a young boy.

Good god.

Hopper had a sudden and vivid image of watching them pull the body of Will Byers out of the quarry, waterlogged and pale white and blue with death. He pushed down the urge to vomit and stepped closer, feet shuffling wearily through the scorched earth. The fire continued around them, as he dropped to his knees and reached out, swallowed hard, and pulled the boy by his shoulder until he'd rolled onto his back.

Jim Hopper stared.

The kid looked virtually untouched.

Okay, he looked *shitty*, covered in sweat and dirt and skin so pale he could see veins, and those under eye bags could've fit on someone three times his age, but there was no red, blistered skin falling off bone, no burns. Hell, his clothes didn't even appear *singed*.

"What the fuck," He whispered, and like a magic spell, the kid's chest seized and he coughed, loud and dry, "Hey, it's okay, it's okay!" He tried to sound reassuring, but the small boy collapsed back into unconsciousness.

The wail of sirens sounded in the distance, and Hopper looked up.

They had to go.

As they got closer to where Hopper'd left El, he vaguely registered that the fire seemed a lot *dimmer* than it had been on his way in, but he tucked those observations away in the file marked *Shit To Keep Me Up At Night* in his brain for later.

He had the kid in his arms; he'd started shivering as soon as Hopper had lifted him from the ground—like that made any fucking sense—so he tried to hold him as close as he could without feeling weird about it.

Seeing Joyce in the clearing, crouched near El, felt like a dying man seeing an oasis.

When they saw him break through the smoking remains of what had only recently been a raging fire, they both yelled, but El made it to him first. Dried blood tracks were coming out of both her nostrils, but she threw herself at him anyway.

"Careful, careful," he chided, conscious of the kid squished between them, but the boy didn't even stir, and Hopper took her embrace gratefully. "You okay?"

She nodded, wiping tears from her cheeks, "Scared. Happy now." She smiled, and he felt his heart swell for his little fighter.

"That's the kid?" Joyce's voice broke through, staring at the boy in his arms from a few feet away. She looked like she'd seen a ghost.

The sirens sounded again, and Hopper immediately set off at a brisk pace towards the truck.

"We'll figure it out later, right now we gotta get the hell out of here."

XXX

"You gonna jump or what, Eds?"

"Are you kidding, dipshit? That fall could kill me."

"We did it all the time like two years ago!"

"Yeah, and we clearly had a fucking deathwish—"

"—have to watch you hold her hand for even one more second I'm going to lose it—"

"—wouldn't be holding hers if I could just fucking hold yours—"

"—Richie—"

"... Eds."

"This is so hard, why does this have to be so hard?"

"I know, baby, I know."

"It's not fair. I just want to be with you, Richie."

"I miss you too, Eds. I love you."

"You really have nothing else to say about it?"

"Why is that so surprising?"

"I don't know, I know how particular you can be, and for something as big as our first place, I just wanted it to be perfect—"

"It already is perfect, Rich. It's ours."

"Psst, Eddie."

"What, Richie?"

"I don't want to go to bed mad. I'm sorry. I love you."

"I love you too, dumbass. C'mere."

"What is that."

"Do you want me to answer that, because I know you don't like it when I answer your rhetorical questions—"

"Why is it in my living room."

"Her name is Pollyanna and she's ten which is like over a hundred in dog years and I love her and you will too."

"—your fault, you know that."

"I just—if I had been there, I could have done something, been faster—"

"Eddie, she had a heart attack, in the middle of the day, it isn't—"

"Look, I don't expect you to understand—"

"Ben and Bev are waiting for us—"

"Let 'em wait. Cause I can't anymore."

"Richie, really? On their night?"

"Weddings got me thinking about love, can you believe it?"

"Bev will actually kill you."

"Then let's keep it our little secret, just for tonight. But you haven't answered."

"You haven't asked, loser."

"Touché. Eddie Kaspbrak—"

It was a slow pull, back to the light.

He lingered for as long as he could in the comforting swell of unconsciousness, the darkness a relief next to the bright heat that had been coursing through him for what felt like forever. He tried desperately to hold onto the wisps of another Eddie's memories as they slipped away like sand through his fingers. An Eddie who'd never forgotten, who'd stayed in Derry, who'd lived and loved and remembered himself and his friends and was brave.

Don't make me go.

He shifted, and sensation started to return. Fabric against his face, light settling softly over his eyelids; muffled footsteps, a sink turning on and off. The faint smell of something burning.

Eddie opened his eyes.

A ceiling. A bed. A desk. A window.

Some ugly-ass curtains.

A poster for *JAWS*—okay that was kind of cool.

Nothing looked familiar.

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck—

He scrambled to get out of the bed, praising who the fuck ever that at least he was still wearing his old clothes, even though they looked like he'd been rolling around in a garbage heap and smelled even worse. In his haste, his legs got caught in the sheets he'd been cocooned in and he hit the carpet with a loud *thump*.

Another thought occurred to him, *oh god*, but when he reached down to disentangle himself, there was nothing. No singed fabric, no black marks.

He stood, pulling back the blanket that covered the bed. Still nothing.

He pulled the blanket off entirely, then the sheet underneath. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Was it all a dream?

He was halfway through pulling the elastic up on the bottommost sheet so he could inspect the mattress when there was a knock on the door. Eddie froze.

“You okay in there?”

That voice. Why did he know that voice?

“I’m going to open the door, alright?”

She only waited a tick before the door started to creep open, and Eddie just stared as Joyce from Melvald’s poked her head through. If she was surprised to see the kid who’d been yakking in her employee restroom two days ago now voraciously stripping her sheets, she didn’t let show.

She swung the door open a little wider. “Hi again.”

Eddie stupidly raised a hand and waved. She smiled, and he pulled it back down, feeling the blood rushing to his face.

“We found you in the woods. You’re in my house, just so you know. I’m Joyce, by the way.”

He let his hands unclench from the sheets, heart chattering noisily in his chest. He’d met Joyce before. She’d even given him food. He had no reason for the way his knees were shaking.

Toughen up, Kaspbrak, you’re forty years old.

“Eddie.” He squeaked, then coughing and pressing his voice as deep as he could reasonably go without sounding like a cartoon character. “I’m Eddie.”

Joyce smiled kindly, and it felt weirdly familiar.

“Well Eddie, do you want to get cleaned up and I’ll make some breakfast?”

xxx

The shower could have been godsent, if Eddie didn’t already have a sneaking suspicion that god was a giant intergalactic turtle. The water wasn’t even that hot, but it felt heavenly as he scrubbed and let the water turn brown as it ran down the drain.

Joyce had left him some new clothes, promising she’d throw his current ones in the wash. She said she had a son about his size.

“Will won’t mind,” she’d assured him, handing off a grey t-shirt, an oversized green flannel and a pair of comfortably worn-in sweatpants. “He’s about to hit a growth spurt anyway, I can tell. Mother’s intuition.”

Mother knows best, Eddie-bear.

He tried not to shiver as he thanked her and locked the door to the bathroom behind him.

When he was done he threw the clothes on as quickly as he could without looking in the mirror. He knew he’d have to deal with it at some point but he’d had a rough couple of days, okay? So sue him if he still wasn’t ready.

Usually the idea of wearing someone else’s clothing would have his skin crawling—an acquaintance from college had once suggested they go thrift shopping and he’d nearly had a coronary. But now Eddie was just reminded of all the times he’d borrowed pajamas from Bill at sleepovers, or swim trunks from Stan (who always brought extra) when they went to the quarry. Mike and Ben had once secretly snuck him a box of their old sweatshirts when they’d outgrown them because they knew how much Eddie liked them oversized.

It still blew his forty-year-old mind, that he hadn’t actually been as

alone as he'd always thought. He'd had friends once. The kind of friends who wove their love for him in the very fabric that they wore, and then let him wear it too.

But he couldn't linger on it, not here, not now. So he unlocked the door and wandered down the hall slowly, towards where he could hear Joyce talking.

"—should be done soon. You want another pancake, El?"

"Yes please."

El?

He stepped through the threshold into the kitchen, eyes trying to take everything in as quickly as possible before he was noticed. The space wasn't huge, but it was open between the kitchen and the living room. Joyce was facing the stove, away from Eddie, as she flipped pancakes in a skillet. At the kitchen table sat two others—a girl he knew and a huge, hulking man that he didn't but who already had two piercing eyes on him.

"Well, look who's decided to join us."

Eddie bristled, and the man just continued to stare. "You got something to say about it, asshole?"

Nice, Eddie, antagonize the biggest guy in the room.

The guy frowned, but the girl beside him smacked him on the shoulder as she scooped up a forkful of pancakes.

"Stop." She turned to him and smiled tentatively. "Hi Eddie."

Eddie's stomach sank into his feet. "Hi Jane."

She nodded to her own plate and took a big bite. "You want pancakes?"

"Jane, I'm sorry."

She chewed and swallowed. "It's okay."

No one spoke for a moment, until the big guy sighed.

“Sit down kid.” He gestured to the other side of the table. “We need to talk.”

Notes for the Chapter:

When you want to have action in your fic and it means you have to figure out how to write action even when you are definitely not an action writer.

(Sardonic writing personality aside, I want to thank everyone for their sweet comments and the nice reception this fic has had. I will continue to work hard on it.)

I hope everyone who is celebrating Juneteenth today feels immense love and joy, and everyone else is taking the time to educate themselves and get involved in their communities and support Black-owned businesses. And for the love of god, REMEMBER TO VOTE AND VOTE WITH INTENTION.

5. 4, 2, 4

When the Losers were maybe 10 or so—before they were formally “The Losers”, before Ben and Mike and Bev were even a blip on their radar—Went Tozier had rented *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* for himself and his wife to watch, and after they went to bed, for his young son to sneak down to the den. For weeks after, Richie had shown up to school with finger guns blazing, accent caught somewhere between the Southern belle and a hobo gold-miner as he figured out his newest Voice. (He finally settled somewhere near enough to Clint Eastwood that it had impressed Eddie as a kid, and when he was a little older, made his stomach tingle and his cheeks warm.)

Eddie had never been in a standoff, but he thought sitting across the table from the man who called himself “Hopper” might be the closest he’d ever get.

To either side of them sat Joyce, who had quickly pressed a mug of something warm into his hands as he sat down, and Jane, who apparently also went by El.

“Let’s cut the bullshit, Eddie.” The older man leaned back in his chair, claspings his hands across his stomach, which stuck out a little in the way Eddie knew was probably from drinking too much. “What do you remember about the last 24 hours?”

Eddie frowned. *24 hours?*

“It’s Sunday morning, sweetie. You’ve been asleep almost an entire day.” Joyce said quietly, like she was breaking something to him.

Eddie’s heart seized in his chest, but he tried not to let it show.

An entire day, wasted. What if I missed it?

He didn’t know exactly what he was maybe missing, but the turtle hadn’t given him any kind of fucking instructions to go with his half-assed mission.

"I was in the woods," he started carefully, eyes glancing to Jane, but he couldn't read the look she was giving him, "and I found a cabin."

Hopper looked a little more alert at this. "You *found* it? Or you were *looking* for it?"

"I *happened* to *stumble upon* it, for your information—"

"So you, what, just thought you'd Goldilocks your way in and have a little snack? Take a little nap and everything'd be all fine and dandy?"

"Jim." Jane snapped, and Eddie watched in shock as the man instantly shut up. "I invited him. You know."

Something in Eddie's gut twisted at her words. They'd spoken about him already, before he'd walked in. Jane and this Hopper man were connected, somehow, and she'd told him about when Eddie was near delirious and vulnerable. He probably knew how Eddie had almost burned the cabin down.

It was stupid, to feel betrayed by this girl he'd barely known for five minutes. He pulled his borrowed flannel a little tighter around him.

"You came in, you ate, you went to sleep." The man exhaled, seeming somewhat chastised. "Then what? Where were you before then?"

Dying in an underground cavern from an alien stab-wound 31 years in the future, what's it to ya fatass?

Eddie didn't answer, looking down into the murky depths of whatever Joyce had poured into the mug. It smelled like some kind of tea—chamomile, maybe?

"Fine, you know what? Let's go with what I know. I get a call that there's a forest fire raging in the woods near my cabin, and when I get there, El informs me that you're in the fucking center of it. So I book it through flaming hell to save your scrawny little ass—"

Eddie's skin began to prickle, his breathing picking up half a tick. There had been a fire, after all. "So what, you want a thank-you card? A parade?"

"I pulled you out of literal flames!"

"Really? Because I don't see any burns. Sure you weren't just imagining your own heroics, old man?" *Shut up Eddie shut up Eddie shut up shut up—*

Hopper's face was starting to turn a particular shade of scarlet. "Alright you little punk, this is how you wanna play? Let's play."

"Hop—" Joyce tried to intervene, but he put up a hand.

"No, if this little bastard's gonna play hard to get, I will bring the game *right* to him." Hopper pulled something out from under the table, and Eddie's breath hitched when he realized it was his fanny pack. He hadn't even thought about it. "Look familiar?"

He gritted his teeth. "Give that back."

The older man ignored him, tossing it across the table towards him, but Eddie didn't move. "Didn't have anything useful in it—no identification, no money. But it did have this."

From his own front pocket, he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and unfolded it before them. Joyce balked.

"That's—those are Will's drawings!"

"And what could a random kid want with them? Unless he's not so random after all."

Blood rushed to his face, but he stayed silent.

"So *Eddie*, if that is your *real name*, who're you working for?" Hopper looked a little more unhinged than he had seemed at the beginning of their conversation, and the prickling feeling on Eddie's skin felt more intense. He cupped the mug in his hands until his knuckles were white.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"The Lab? Dr. Brenner? Or maybe Owens and his goons?"

“Who—”

“The government? The Commies?”

“Your shitty conspiracy theories aren’t funny—”

“Or are you straight out of the Upside Down? Another freaky monster with a human face? Because I’ll tell you kid, it’s been a couple months since the last one but I’m raring to go again—”

“HOPPER!” Joyce yelled, “That is ENOUGH.”

“What the fuck is WRONG with you people?” The prickling on Eddie’s skin was near unbearable, his head spinning with everything that was being thrown at him.

“That’s rich coming from you, you walking menace—”

He clenched his eyes shut.

“I didn’t ask to be here! *I didn’t ask for this!*”

“Eddie!” Jane yelled, and he looked up to see her pointing back and him—or more accurately, at the mug that was still clenched in his hands. The tea inside was bubbling and hissing wildly, like he’d pulled it directly off the stove, and was beginning to leak over onto his uncovered hands. He yelped and tried to get away, but his momentum combined with the fact that one of his hands was still caught in the handle of the mug caused it to go flying through the air, the boiling liquid headed directly for Joyce.

Then suddenly, Jane threw her hand out, and everything stopped.

Eddie blinked, catching himself with both hands on the table.

The mug and its contents were... floating, in the air. It was like a photo, water splashes caught in midair, the droplets shimmering in 360-degree glory, or like that weird art piece he’d seen once at the MoMA.

“What the fuck,” he breathed, for maybe the six hundredth time in three days, as Jane delicately moved her hand and the floating liquid

slowly moved itself back into the cup.

So entranced by this beautiful, terrifying choreography, Eddie didn't notice the burning smell until it was too late. He jerked his hands away from the table, "Fuck, shit—"

Where he'd been leaning, were two, dark, smoking handprints burnt into the wood.

Hopper stared. Joyce stared.

Jane was... smiling?

"Sorry," he murmured, holding his hands close to his chest. He stared at the mug that had softly floated back down to the table and tried to smother the panic beginning to lodge itself in his throat.

"Eddie?" He must have not been doing a very good job, because Jane didn't sound like she was smiling anymore.

Joyce had Hopper by the upper arm and was already dragging him up from his seat.

"Outside, *now*."

"Ow, *ow*, okay, watch it—"

The front door slammed, and then a screen door, and then Joyce's muffled yelling.

"Eddie?" Jane asked again. She scooted her chair to be closer to his, but his vision was starting to go fuzzy around the edge of his eyes so it was hard to pay attention to much else. "Okay?"

He shook his head, breaths coming out harsher and harsher.

She reached forward like she was going to grab his arm, but hesitated. "Can I... touch?" Jane asked. He nodded.

It's her fucking funeral, I guess.

Rather than going for his arm, she reached for his hand—he flinched,

instinctually, but whatever he'd done to burn the table seemed to have receded. She carefully kneaded the skin of his hand with her thumbs, tracing the lines and the areas around his red scabbed palms and over..

She did this for a while, going back and forth between his hands until he managed to get his breathing under control. At some point she pushed the sleeves of his flannel up to show his bare forearms, running her hands up and down the pale skin there too. If Eddie hadn't been so keyed up, the action could have put him straight back to sleep.

"Why do they call you El?" He asked instead. She paused, looking at him with that unreadable expression she did so well. Eddie shrugged, maybe still a little sour about her selling him out to Hopper. "You said your name was Jane. I don't know anything about you." The girl called Jane and El nodded before letting him go to pull up the sleeve of her own shirt.

There, in tiny print, were three digits inked into the skin.

"I was raised in a lab, for testing kids with special powers." Like their first encounter, her speech was slow but strong. Eddie felt his stomach drop. "The people there were... bad people."

Maybe it was because he'd been groomed to think the worst of the world, or because he'd experienced firsthand the callous damage adults could do to children, but he fit the pieces together almost instantly.

"They wanted to make you into a weapon."

She nodded. "I escaped, but no name. So," she held up her arm again, like an offering.

Eleven. "El."

Jane who was also El smiled a little. She tapped his arm.

"No number," a tilt of the head, "No lab?"

He shook his. "No, no lab."

She nodded again, and they fell into quiet; she sipped what must have been hot cocoa from her mug and staring at the door the adults had gone through. They weren't yelling anymore, but he could hear the vague drumming of a quick, tense discussion float through the air even still.

Eddie stared down at his hands. He'd never been dangerous in this way before. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone."

"I know. You didn't." She said easily, fact, and extended her hands out, as if showing him her kingdom. "See? All good."

xxx

Eventually Joyce and Hopper did come back in from outside

The older man collapsed back into the chair, but Joyce opted to stand nearby.

"You're not from around here, are you kid?"

Eddie shook his head, feeling drained in a different way than the last few days.

"You got parents?"

"They're dead." He hadn't seen his mother in almost eight months before she died of a heart attack when he was 30. She'd been cremated upstate and he'd had the ashes given to her sister, unable to imagine himself spreading them over the ocean or across mountaintops or whatever dumb bullshit people did. He'd gone up to help clean out the old house she'd insisted on living in, even against the advice of her doctors, and within moments could feel her voice in his head like a vice grip.

"Don't do that Eddie-bear, you're delicate—"

"Listen to me, I will always be here to take care of you—"

"Mommy would never hurt you, Eddie, Mommy just wants to make you better—"

He'd walked right out, and told the realtor she could either sell or trash anything inside.

Burn it to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Joyce gazed sadly at him, "That must have been really hard for you."

What was hard was thinking I had never had the balls to stand up to her, and then remembering, finally, that I did, once. But I lost that too.

"It's been a long time." He said instead, pulling his knees to his chest and looking away. He wanted to slink back down the hallway and curl up in the bed with no sheets and sleep until this dream went away.

"Eddie, are you hungry?" Joyce suddenly moved towards the kitchen. "I have pancakes, eggs, I can cook up some sausage if you want—"

"No thank you." Like a bad movie, his stomach chose that precise moment to betray him, rumbling loudly. Jane giggled, and Joyce just turned the stove on quietly.

"Alright spitfire, here's what's gonna happen," Hopper sighed, "You're gonna stay here with Joyce for a few days, until we can be sure you're not going to spontaneously combust and *actually* burn my cabin down, then you'll come stay with El and me."

"You... live together?" This day was turning all different kinds of fucked up—

Jane smiled, bringing her empty mug into the kitchen. "Jim's my dad."

The look Eddie was giving him must have been incredulous, because Hopper's small smile turned into a daring glare, complete with half-cocked eyebrow.

Really? This guy?

But Eddie wasn't exactly a connoisseur of great parental figures, so maybe he wasn't one to talk.

"What if I don't want to go with you?" He asked instead, which maybe wasn't much better. "You can't keep me here."

"You could go back to sleeping in the woods, or on other people's property without their knowledge," Hopper shrugged, with a look that said *because that was going so well for you before*, and took something out of his shirt pocket, "And I could get called to come investigate, and have to figure out how to tell people why I can't send a kid that looks like he's barely old enough to tie his own shoes to the hospital or hand him over to CPS."

It was a sheriff's badge.

Fuck.

"Easier to keep all us freaks in one place, I guess."

The sheriff rolled his eyes. "It is *safer* if I know where the two kids in town with superpowers are, so that I can make sure they are *protected*." Eddie snorted—he really couldn't help himself.

"Protected from who? Nobody knows I'm here."

Hopper sighed again, exchanging a glance with Joyce.

"Somehow, sparky, I find that hard to believe."

xxx

Hopper and Jane left just as Joyce plopped a plate of breakfast in front of her new houseguest.

"Let me know if he gets out of hand," Hopper had mumbled to her when she walked them out, but she wasn't worried and she told him so. He just shrugged, glancing back at where the kids were saying

goodbye. Eddie was noticeably more relaxed when he felt like it was just him and El.

“He’s not a bad kid, Hop,” she insisted.

“That doesn’t mean bad things won’t happen,” something else was bothering him, she could tell, but now wasn’t the time to pry. Joyce could play the long game.

“I hope you’ve got enough room in there,” she said now to Eddie, grabbing the bread from the toaster and wrapping it in paper towel before placing it on his plate, which was loaded already with eggs and sausage.

“Looks great.”

He wasn’t looking at it. She paused by the refrigerator.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine.” He was watching her now, and Jesus, she didn’t think she’d ever seen a kid his age look so... neutral. His stomach growled again, loudly, but he didn’t look away, or even touch the fork beside him.

But Joyce Byers was a mother, and she knew when she was being tested.

She walked back over calmly, noting how he suddenly tensed at her arrival, before snagging one of the sausage links off his plate. She made a show of taking a big bite, smiling sneakily like she’d gotten away with something.

“These are my boys’ favorite, so I always make sure to get extra when I’m at the store.” She chattered, turning on her heel. “You a butter-on-toast man or a jam-on-toast kinda guy?”

“... jam, please.” She heard the telltale scrape of silverware against dishware, and grabbed a new jar of strawberry jam out of the cabinet as well as a sealed bottle of water from the fridge. She dropped both off on the table, pleased to see Eddie had already inhaled the sausage and was now poking at the eggs.

Wanting to give him some privacy while he ate, she turned to the dishes already starting to pile in the sink, and they fell into a semi-comfortable silence. She was halfway through figuring out how to tell her boys about their guest when the devil himself appeared at her elbow out of nowhere .

“I’m done.”

“Jesus Christ—” She almost dropped the plate she’d been holding, but a hand reached out and steadied it. “Eddie, you *startled* me.” He winced apologetically, but led her still shaking hand to put the plate on the drying rack. He was still holding his own plate in his other hand. “You want seconds?”

He hesitated, then nodded slowly.

“Sausage and eggs are on the stove, bread is in the box if you want more toast.”

There was a pause and she grabbed a towel to dry her hands, opting to save the rest of the dishes for later. Eddie was already back at the table, inhaling probably more protein than he’d had in days.

Ah, kids. “Careful or you’ll choke.”

Eddie paused, fork halfway to his mouth, and blinked at her like he’d just woken up. He mumbled something under his breath and continued to eat, but at a more controlled pace. Eventually he finished, and stared at her with those strange old eyes.

“Why aren’t you asking me anything?”

Joyce snorted. “Do you want me to be?”

“Your friend didn’t seem to have an issue.”

“Hopper has one of those gruff on the outside, soft and squishy on the inside kind of personalities,” she smiled, “But he can also be an asshole sometimes.”

“Sometimes...”

“He’s protective.” She sighed, “Believe it or not, you’re not the craziest thing that’s happened around here in the last few years.”

“What do you—”

A sudden, loud honk cut him off. Joyce blinked.

“Oh shit.”

Of course they’re early, today of all days—

The door opened, and two panicked looking teens flew through it.

“Mom?” Will called, stopping short when his eyes caught on the boy sitting at their kitchen table.

Why do I already feel like this might go to shit?

“Wow, you guys are home early.” She tried to sound cheery, even though she could feel the tension in the room rising. “There’s someone I want to introduce you to. Eddie, this is Jonathan and Will.”

Notes for the Chapter:

this fic needs a warning for overuse of the phrase
"jesus christ"

also TMNT band aids are NOT fireproof kids, do not
try at home.

6. The Stranger

If Will had to listen to Mike talk about El for one more minute, he was going to scream.

“... and she’s such a badass, but like sometimes I don’t know if she really *needs* me—”

She shouldn’t have to need you, she already wants to be with you.

Ok, maybe it was silly of him to think that they’d still stay up and watch old monster movies and eat popcorn and play D&D until Mrs. Wheeler screeched from the top of the stairs that it was *three o’clock in the godforsaken morning boys go to SLEEP—*

But he’d take anything over this particular version of hell.

“Can we do something?” Dustin groaned, taking the words right out of his mouth, “As much as I want to hear you two ladies talk about your love lives for another three hours, this might be the last time my mom lets me stay over before the end of the school year.”

“Dustin don’t lie, spring break is coming up.” Lucas scoffed. “You’re really telling me your mom wants you home for an entire week?”

“Hey, my mom and I have a *great relationship*, and you don’t have to be *jealous* of it, Lucas—”

“Oh yeah, what are we doing for spring break?” Will jumped in, eager for the change of subject. “I thought maybe, there’s this convention in Indianapolis we could look into—it’s for like fantasy RPG stuff.”

“That sounds cool!” Dustin grinned, “Remember the Star Trek one we went to a few years ago? That was awesome.” He flashed a Vulcan salute, and Will laughed, sending one back. He wasn’t always great with alien stuff these days, but the colorful, if a little hokey vibe of the 60’s era sci-fi show was safe.

“Yeah, it does, I just... I don’t know, my mom said if I helped her go through and move some boxes out of our basement over spring break

she'd pay me, and I could use the extra cash to take Max out." Lucas said.

"Take her *where*? All you guys ever do is go to the arcade."

"Take her out on like a real date, dumbass. And she likes the arcade, so suck on that—"

Will tuned his bickering friends out and turned to Mike, who was pointedly looking down and pulling at a thread on his jeans. "Mike?"

"Hey, yeah, so I sort of promised El I'd spend the week with her, since it's like the biggest break we've had since Christmas. And I figured it'd be fine, since you know, I see you guys at school everyday."

Will's heart sank. Mike kept his eyes on his hands.

"I'd bring her to the convention, totally, but you know how Hopper is, he doesn't want her around that many people yet..."

He worked really hard to keep his smile from fully falling off his face, but he didn't think he was having much success. "No, you're... you're right. She probably wouldn't... wouldn't even get it."

He tried to shove down the hurt, the feeling of second place-ness that had started to permeate all his interactions with his oldest friend. This was the person Mike had been waiting for, had called every night for almost a year. He wanted to be supportive. He *needed* to be supportive.

Dustin, however had no such issue. "You're ditching us for a full week to hang out with your girlfriend?" He tossed a pillow at Mike, smacking him in the head. "That's fucking lame, Wheeler."

"El's not lame!"

"No, El's a badass. *You're* lame—"

"Will!" Karen Wheeler's voice broke through the noise, "Phone for you, honey—it's your mom."

The other boys barely took a beat before returning to their argument, and Will slipped quietly up the stairs and took the phone from her hand.

xxx

“Hey, Will, can you settle a—dude, are you okay?”

His legs were trembling, and his grip on the railing was like steel as he descended back down into the basement. His head was buzzing.

fire fire fire fire

“Will?” Lucas was suddenly in front of him, hands bracing his shoulders. “Breathe with me, buddy, breathe—there you go.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“There was... a f-fire.” Will wheezed, finally feeling the constricting force on his lungs relax a little. “In the w-woods.”

“Shit shit shit,” Dustin jumped up to join them, “Is your mom okay?”

Will nodded, “Yeah, it s-sounded like it wasn’t... wasn’t too close.”

“Do you think it could have been close to the cabin? Did she hear from El?”

“Shut UP Mike, for the love of God—”

Will didn’t even have the energy to be annoyed, his mind continuing to spiral even as they settled down to watch *Return of the Jedi* on VHS. Lucas fell asleep like he always did during movies, and after the credits rolled, the rest of them slid into their sleeping bags on the floor. It wasn’t until after Dustin started snoring that Mike’s voice permeated the dark basement.

“Hey Will?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry about the fire—that must have been scary, to hear that from your mom.” Will’s felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and he was never more grateful for the cover of night. “Are you okay?”

He’d never told his friends that he sometimes dreamt of fire and heat, sweating through his clothes, through his own skin, his body replaced by the suffocating smoke of something sinister. That he had nightmares of bright lights and space heaters and hot poker pulled straight from the fire.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.” Will said quietly. As if there was anything else he could say. “Thanks Mike.”

He didn’t sleep that night.

In the morning he called Jonathan as early as he could without waking the rest of the Wheeler household, and asked to be picked up early.

“Are you sure?” His older brother had taken Nancy to the next town over to see some art exhibit, and they had stayed the night at her aunt’s. It would be at least a 45 minute wait, and that was only if Jonathan left immediately “Mom told me it didn’t really even get near the house—”

“Please Jonathan?” He felt panicky in a way that must have tipped his brother off, because he stopped asking questions and just said he’d be there as soon as he could.

Even with the distance, Will was gone before the other boys woke up.

xxx

“... Eddie, this is Jonathan and Will.”

When he locked eyes with the boy sitting at the far end of their

kitchen table, Will felt a zinging sensation rush up his spine.

“It’s you,” The boy said, big brown eyes unrelenting, “you’re the one from the picture.”

“What picture—” But it was already in front of him, wasn’t it? Sitting on the edge of the kitchen table, an old drawing of his, made on one of the many nights where the presence of the Mind Flayer had been threatening his sanity.

A sad boy surrounded by the darkness of death and destruction.

Not quite dead, but not quite alive either.

Zombie boy.

You were in my castle. Will wanted to scream, *It’s not yours, it’s mine.*

“What are you guys doing home? Didn’t you take Nancy to Townsen last night?” His mom had that worried smile on her face, her eyes going back and forth between the three boys.

“We wanted to make sure you were okay,” Jonathan started, swinging the door shut behind him

“Oh honey that’s so sweet, but I told you guys yesterday the fire didn’t even make it this far—”

“I had a weird feeling. I asked Jonathan to bring me home early.” His mom went silent, and he felt a little guilty for how manipulative it felt, no matter how true. Will knew it wasn’t normal for parents to unquestioningly follow the ambiguous “feelings” of their kids, but the Byers clan hadn’t been normal since 1983.

She pepped back up pretty quickly. “Anyway, Eddie is Hopper’s nephew, and he’s going to stay with us for a couple of days while Jim gets the cabin ready—”

“He’s staying at the cabin?” Jonathan’s silent question felt obvious.

With El?

But his mom didn't miss a beat.

"Yes, El and Eddie have already met and she's very excited to have a new friend."

The boy called Eddie snorted loudly, dropping his cutlery on the plate in front of him. Their eyes met again, and Will bristled when he saw the challenge there. Alarms were going off all over his body.

I'm going to figure out what you're hiding.

"Thank you for breakfast, Joyce." Eddie stood before retreating down the hallway. Will grit his teeth when he saw his own bedroom door open and then close.

His mother's shoulders slumped, and she let out an exasperated breath.

"Come on guys, really? He's a guest."

Will didn't respond, and she put her face in her hands. He felt a little bad, but his body was still ringing from the way Eddie had stared at him like he knew something Will didn't.

Jonathan sighed, picked up the empty plate where Eddie had been sitting, and started towards the kitchen before he stopped.

"Wait, what happened to the table?"

xxx

When Jonathan walked into Will's room, he'd sort of expected that maybe Eddie would be there—considering he'd been there for the better part of the afternoon. But he hadn't expected him to be standing next to the bookshelf, wearing his mother's pink oven mitts, and trying to hold a book open like it could blow at any moment.

“Looking for something?”

The boy jumped, dropping the book. “Jesus, don’t fucking do that—”

“Whoa, sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me,” the younger boy huffed, “you startled me. There’s a difference.”

“Uh, okay? Sure.”

“It—” He stopped himself, mumbling under his breath before reaching down and trying to maneuver the book back into his oven mitts. “Fuck, I lost my page.”

He dared to take a couple of steps closer, “I’m Jonathan, by the way.”

“I’m aware.” He felt his face go a little red at the curtness. Jesus, this kid couldn’t be older than eleven or twelve and was worse than some of his classmates at Hawkins High. He watched him struggle to flip through the delicate pages with hands covered in thick fabric.

“Do you want help with that?”

Eddie mumbled something under his breath, then sighed. “Fine. Can you turn the pages until I say stop?”

As Jonathan stepped in closer, he caught a peek at the cover of the book—it was a battered old copy of *The End of Eternity* by Isaac Asimov. It had been his originally, and passed down to Will when Jonathan was trying to make room on his own bookshelf, but he didn’t know if his younger brother had actually ever opened it.

The pages were yellowed, and a little on the Bible-thin side, so he tried to go slowly. Eddie’s eyes scanned quickly over each page, and Jonathan let himself get a better look at the kid his mother had taken in. He reminded him of Will a little, actually—big eyes and brown hair, a little smaller than average—but there was a severity to him that was disorienting. Not to mention the line on his cheek that he’d thought might have been a birth mark from a distance, but was most definitely scar tissue.

“Stop, stop!” He was shaken out of his thoughts by Eddie’s exclamations as the younger boy stuck one thumb down to save the page and pulled the book away.

The words came out of Jonathan’s mouth before he could stop them. “Can I ask what happened to your face?”

Eddie stared at him for a second with an unreadable look before turning back to the book in his hands. “Skiing accident.”

“You were... skiing.”

“Yep.” He popped the last syllable in a way that said, ‘end of story.’ Jonathan huffed a frustrated laugh.

You really don’t give anything away, do you?

He plopped down on the bed, which was covered in other books from the shelf: *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Time Machine*, *Time and Again*, *The Crossroads of Time*, *The Practice Effect*...

“You really into sci-fi?”

“You really into giving me the third degree?” Eddie snapped back. “I’m busy. Do you need something?”

Contrary to what this kid clearly thought, Jonathan wasn’t an idiot and he wasn’t ashamed of a tactical retreat.

“Nope.” He stood and made his way back to the door, “Dinner’ll be soon.”

The other boy didn’t respond, so Jonathan closed the door behind him.

Whatever it was that Will thought Eddie was hiding, it couldn’t be good.

Of all the stares he'd endured since being dropped in this Twilight Zone hell dimension, Will Byers had to be the most irritating. It felt like the kid could see beneath Eddie's skin, could peel him apart like a fucking onion and already name every layer inside.

After hours of fruitless research and a tense dinner, he was lying in the dark of the Byers' living room, listening to rain patter against the windows. He'd opted to sleep on the couch, against Joyce's mothering, because it seriously looked like her son might murder him if he spent one more minute in Will's room. Normally he'd never pass up a mattress over anything else, but he figured if this body was fine passing out in the middle of the woods, he'd probably make it through a couple nights on the couch.

(He only briefly let himself think about falling asleep sitting up, watching movies in the Denbrough's basement, or curled up in the hay in the Hanlon's barn, or swinging back and forth in the hammock at the clubhouse, legs tangled with one Loser in particular.)

He hadn't had time to process how strange it felt to be a kid again. Eddie hadn't been a massive dude as an adult (of course Richie and Mike AND Ben had been either six feet or more, the world was out to get him) but he'd forgotten how much *bigger* everything seemed when you were young. His legs didn't even reach the end of the couch, and he reflexively wiggled his toes in the open space.

Then there were the impulses, and those he did remember. The flash of emotions that had him lashing out, poison words on his tongue, ready to cut anything that threatened him—and it felt like there was a lot more that could threaten him, these days.

For more than twenty years, he'd pushed his feelings down, down into the depths of his heart until they were so tightly stuck together they went numb. He'd hardened himself, in the way he thought all adults did, to dealing with life the way it should be lived, and had smothered the small part of him that cried out for its own desires.

You don't just get the things you want, Eddie. He'd thought, over and over again. *You have responsibilities, and nobody wants to play with the*

kid who can't follow the rules.

Things had started to change. Going back to Derry had been the start; seeing the Losers gather together, fighting his old fears, the feeling of hovering over Richie after he'd been *sure* he'd killed It—

But waking up without the weight of a wedding band on his finger, without the slog of stupid emails from Troy in accounting, without a dollar to his name and fire in his fingertips?

Eddie might as well have been a live wire.

His skin tingled at the thought.

Restless, he unburied himself from the cocoon of blankets Joyce had dropped on him and stood. The house creaked and moaned; from the pictures he'd seen decorating the hallways and over the mantle, the Byers had lived here a long time. There was comfort in all the furnishings, and even though some of the appliances had seen better days, the space was clearly cared for.

It's just because you think Joyce is nice. Your bias is fucking up your reasoning. But where usually in unfamiliar or uncontrollable spaces his brain started spinning with statistics and what-ifs and images of himself decomposing on a hospital bed, there was nothing but a warm, low hum.

He walked slowly, conscious of every sound from the floorboards beneath the carpet, until he was standing in front of the phone mounted to the wall. He pulled it off the hook, and the dial tone felt deafening in the quiet of the night.

Putting the number carefully into the rotary dial was more like muscle memory than conscious effort. A sequence he hadn't thought of in years, suddenly as familiar on his tongue as when he'd called it everyday.

He waited.

Hey Eds, how's my favorite Lady K doing?

One beat.

Eddie-spaghetti, I've been a-waiting for my favorite-a pasta dish to call all-a day-a—

Two.

Eddie... wow, Eddie Kaspbrak? Doth mine own ears deceive me? It's been forever...

A long beep.

The number you have dialed is not in service. Please try again—

xxx

The next morning passed in a whirlwind as Eddie watched Joyce and the boys get ready for the day. He cradled a cup of coffee in his hands (*"black, please"*) and listened idly to the scraping of silverware against dishes as they scarfed down their breakfast and shoved papers into bags. If his coffee stayed warm for longer than usual, well wasn't that strange?

Will still seemed to be in a foul mood, and took time to send glares in Eddie's direction. Eddie knew it was partially his own fault for baiting the kid, but he'd been openly hostile from almost the moment they met and there had to be a reason why. Joyce and to some extent Jonathan were careful with Will, but Eddie had seen the fire in those big buggy eyes, and he knew it would only be a matter of time before the kid boiled over and spilled his guts.

He couldn't help but let his mind wander back to the picture he'd taken out of Castle Byers that first day.

Like calls to like.

"Alright, I'll be home by 5, 4:30 if Jeff shows up to his shift on time," Joyce said, breathlessly patting herself down to make sure she had

everything. “Uniform, keys, lunch—I’m sorry again I couldn’t get off work Eddie, but there’s plenty to do around here until we get back!” He shrugged noncommittally.

“Eddie’s on a sci-fi kick—plenty of reading to do,” Jonathan offered with a smile, pulling his backpack over his shoulders, “Will, let’s go!”

“Coming!” Will scurried down the hall from his room, shooting Eddie one last unwelcoming look before he followed his brother and mother out the door. He listened for the sound of two car engines start and then slowly fade into the distance.

Eddie walked to the front window that overlooked the porch—leaning up against the railing was a small bike.

Perfect.

Notes for the Chapter:

Eddie is a brat and an asshole and he's my favorite.

Townsen, Indiana is not a real place... or is it?

(Please continue to wear masks diligently when you have to leave the house-- it impacts all of us more than you realize!)

7. King of Nowhere

Being back on a bike was... fuck, it was exhilarating.

He hadn't had one since his mother had taken them away from Derry and it had mysteriously gone missing during the move. He'd brought it up to Myra once, and, well.

"In New York City? Are you joking, Eddie? Anyone who bikes in this city is ASKING to go flying across someone's windshield. You might have the right of way, but do you know what the impact of a car going 45 miles an hour does to the human body? You want your corpse splayed out like roadkill in the middle of Times Square for millions of tourists to take pictures of? Do you WANT me to have a heart attack?"

He probably should have seen that coming. She hated that he even drove a car, for fuck's sake.

But flying down the pavement on a bike, wind streaming through his hair and making his eyes water, his heart felt the lightest it'd been. He laughed loud, let his young voice yell as he went down hills, the sound lost to the empty, open roads. Even having to navigate with oven mitts on his hands couldn't dampen this high.

Though the Byers house felt like it was deep in the woods, it took Eddie considerably less time to make it back into central Hawkins on bike than it had on foot. It was considerably deader than it'd been the last time he'd been there (and even that wasn't saying much) but he tried to stay off the main roads as much as he could—he didn't need some truancy officer finding him.

Or worse, Jim Hopper.

Avoiding Melvald's in case Joyce happened to look out the window and catch a glimpse of him, Eddie whizzed by the rest of downtown until he reached the building sitting at the very end. The sign out front was as concrete and unforgiving as a cloudy March in Indiana.

HAWKINS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Inside the building was slightly more welcoming, the lights tinted a little yellow instead of the horrible artificial white. But it got no points for the carpeting, in light and dark oranges that must have been left over from the 70's and had far too much wood paneling for Eddie to ever be fully comfortable. Unsurprisingly, it was almost deserted.

"Can I help you?" The Methuselah behind the desk asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously at him. He painted on the sweetest smile he could muster, the kind of thing that had made the nurses at Derry General squeal and pinch his cheeks.

"I'm looking for the science section?"

The woman's expression didn't change, but she pointed a bent, crone-like finger towards the stacks in the far corner. He squeaked a quick "thank you" and scurried away as quickly as possible, eager to be out of her sight.

His search through the Byers' library hadn't been very fruitful, so it was time to bring out the big guns.

I have a fucking graduate degree. How hard can it be?

xxx

Dustin Henderson would say pretty confidently that out of his immediate circle of friends, he probably had the best handle on dealing with emotions. After his dad left he'd spent a lot of time taking care of his mom, figuring out the differences between good and bad days, scooping her bowls of ice cream before she could ask and hearing her cry when she thought he was asleep.

He could tell when Lucas needed some meaningless bickering after a fight with Max, he knew how to engage Mike in a deep debate about Star Wars to take his mind off not being able to see El, and when to give him shit for the dopey smile on his face. He was even learning that the best time to test his worst jokes on Max was on the morning

she showed up to school quiet, tugging her sleeves down over her hands until the fabric stretched taught across her shoulders.

So when he watched Will walk into first period history, hands clenched into fists, alarms were already going off in his head.

“You okay dude?” He whispered as Will slid into the seat beside him.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Will shot back, dropping his backpack on the ground next to him with a thud. Dustin paused.

“Uh, nothing man, just—just wanted to make sure you were okay after yesterday, you left pretty early.” Will frowned, but seemed to relax a little.

“Oh, yeah, I needed to go home. It’s fine.”

“Your mom is okay and everything?”

“I said it was fine.” The other boy’s tone was unnaturally sharp. Something twinged uncomfortably in Dustin’s gut, and he sat back away from his friend.

“Cool.”

xxx

Hours later, it was becoming apparent that Eddie’s MBA was not going to be of much use here.

He sat on the floor in one of the rows furthest from the entrance, surrounded by a sea of volumes—textbooks, encyclopedias, hell even the farmer’s almanac, but so far *nothing* felt even a little bit helpful. He hadn’t expected to find anything useful at the Byers on time travel or multiple dimension theory—wouldn’t that have just been too easy?—but the amount of fiction books vaguely revolving around the topic had made him... hopeful? Stupid, apparently?

He'd tried to call Richie the night before with the number he was one hundred percent sure in his heart was correct, but the number was disconnected. He'd gone to double check, just in case, but there was no one by the name of Tozier in the phonebook. No Denbroughs. No Marshes, Urises, Hanlons or Hanscoms.

No Kaspbraks.

His breathing picked up as he tossed the phonebook to the side and pulled the closest almanac he could find into his lap.

There was no Derry, Maine on the map.

The space where his hometown had been was empty. Not even some lines to indicate trees, or a little squiggly for a hill or small mountain range. Like nothing had ever been there at all.

Everything that made you who you are is gone. The voice in his head sounded a lot like the clown this time. *No one can help you now. No one is coming to save you.*

He wanted to scream. None of this made any fucking sense.

He'd curled into a ball there on the floor for a while, hands sweating in the oven mitts as he tried to control his breathing. If he lost it now, this whole place would go up in flames and he'd be shit out of luck and resources.

Pull it together, Kaspbrak.

He'd tried to throw himself into more research instead, going through any and every physics and cosmology book he could find, but it quickly deteriorated into reading horrible theses after horrible theses from the 70's about space and linear and non-linear timelines, quack theorists trying to make connections to the assassination of JFK.

Where is fucking Google when you need it?

He closed whatever nonsense he was trying to make sense of with a *thump* before pulling off his oven mitts and tossing them at the closest shelf of books. Before he could think about it, he wrenched open the bag slung across his chest and pulled the small, turtle-shaped stone

out.

“Where the *fuck* am I?” He hissed, “And what the *fuck* is happening?”

The stone stayed silent, as stones do.

Eddie tucked his head in between his legs, squeezing his body together as tightly as he could. “I’m losing it, I’m losing it, Jesus Christ I’m losing it...”

It was hard to explain exactly what happened next.

The stone went ice cold in his grasp, as if he’d plunged his entire fist in a bucket of ice water. He gasped at the painful, zinging sensation. A few feet away, a book fell off a topmost shelf and landed, open, on the ground.

Eddie stared, turning his gaze from the book back to the stone still clenched painfully in his hand. Even though it had no eyes, he could almost feel the little turtle staring expectantly back.

“You can hear me you *little asshole!*?”

The stone was silent, as stones are.

He crept over, narrowly dodging knocking over a towering stack of his own reading materials. The open book was covered in pictures of spiders—spiders crawling with long, grotesque legs, spiders in holes, waiting to drag their prey down, winding up them up in sticky nets—

Hundreds of children’s corpses, suspended in the air, vibrating delicately at the movement below, as if suspended by some near invisible substance—the Clown growing not one, not two, but eight spindly legs, suddenly stronger, faster—the gnashing of claws, like teeth, or—pincers--

Eddie closed his eyes and shoved the book away.

The Spider.

The name clicked into place like a puzzle piece in his brain. He gulped as much air as he could, heart racing. They’d beaten Pennywise, he’d heard the clown’s last miserable breath, had felt it

(sort of) in his own hand when his friends had squeezed for the final time.

But... they hadn't, had they? It had escaped. And maybe it wouldn't ever bother the Losers—*his* Losers, in *their* Derry ever again, but...

I tire of losing lights.

But there would always be another small town, another middle of nowhere for It to hide and prey upon innocent people who didn't know the danger that lurked under their noses.

If he didn't stop It, for good this time.

Save the children and I will bring you home.

"Okay," he whispered, loud in the quiet of the library, in the strangeness of this world that was not his own, but that he was supposed to save, "okay."

xxx

Turns out Hawkins was even more boring than Derry.

He'd switched gears, after his magical little intervention, to looking up as much about the town as he could find. The town records described a settlement founded in the early 19th century, after the purchase of the Northwest Territory, and briefly mentions some notable townsfolk who went on to fight in the Civil War, but other than that nothing out of the ordinary. No mass murders, no holiday explosions, no mysterious disappearances of children exactly 27-years apart.

So It doesn't have a history here.

Or if It did, it was playing an entirely different game. Eddie tried not to think about that.

The third time his stomach rumbled loudly enough that he was sure the librarian could hear it from the looks she was giving him, he sighed and decided to pack it in for the day.

She eyed him again shamelessly as he dropped a couple of books in the counter space labeled “Re-shelves”.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling wide again to hide his frustration. The last thing he needed was this old hag asking questions about the rude kid hanging around in the middle of a school day.

She didn’t smile back. “If you need tutoring, numbers are on the board.”

The corkboard in question was closer to the doors, and Eddie lingered in front of it for appearance’s sake, while he could still feel the librarian’s eyes on him. It was entirely covered in colorful but faded notices for various community gatherings months out of date, instructions on how to use the library copy machine and of course, pages with numbers for various high school tutors—

His eyes stopped, caught on bold black letters peeking out from beneath the signup for the library’s Halloween activities.

BACK TO LIFE

Eddie reached out and lifted the outdated flyer, with a hand that almost didn’t feel like his own, to reveal the newspaper article, neatly cut but yellowed with age.

THE BOY WHO CAME BACK TO LIFE

And underneath, a photo of none other than Will Byers.

xxx

Will let out a deep sigh of relief when the final bell of the day went off, quickly picking up his bag and booking it out of his final period

advanced algebra class. His stomach had been in knots all day, thinking about that Eddie kid sitting in his home, plotting against them.

If he's from the Upside Down, how did he get out? What did he know about El? Did he know Brenner? What if he's being controlled—

“Will, wait up JESUS—”

He'd almost made it all the way down the front steps of the school when Dustin's panting broke his train of thought as the taller boy struggled to catch up.

“What is it, Dustin? Jonathan's gonna be waiting—”

“You're not staying to help Lucas with his bio project? We talked about it this weekend.”

Shit. He'd forgotten.

“I—I can't, something came up with my mom.” Will felt bad when he saw Dustin's disbelief soften into something understanding. He hated lying to his friends, but he wasn't going to put them in danger again as long as he could help it.

“That's okay dude, why didn't you just say so?” Will shrugged, and out of the corner of his eye saw Mike, Lucas and Max approaching them. It would only get harder and harder to get away. Dustin's eyes didn't stray. “You know, Will, if something is bothering you, you can tell us. Or just me.”

His breath hitched. “What? Why would anything—I'm fine.”

“Dude, you've been more wound up than a Mexican jumping bean all day—”

“Hey guys!” Lucas smiled, hands full of bags presumably for his project. “Ready to build a bio-dome?”

“I have to go—”

“What the fuck, Will?” Mike crossed his arms, “Come on, this was

gonna be the time for us to hang.” Will winced involuntarily, torn between embarrassment and annoyance and that little voice at the back of his head humming with *but where is Eddie right now? He could be anywhere, doing anything.*

Dustin scoffed, “If he can’t stay he can’t stay—besides, that’s rich coming from you, Mike—”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Guys, can we focus on my project please—”

“Who the fuck is that?” Max’s voice cut through the chatter, her eyes on something behind him. Will turned, and his stomach sank into his feet. On the sidewalk several yards away from where they stood, was Eddie.

Riding Will’s bike.

... wearing his mother’s oven mitts?

He followed me he’s here to hurt us he’s going to hurt them how did I not notice it’s my fault—

Eddie leapt off the bike, not even bothering to throw out the kickstand, and started running towards them. Will stepped forward, skin tingling in that familiar way and heartbeat thundering in his ears as he prepared to protect his friends any way he knew how.

But when Eddie stopped a few feet in front of him, it didn’t look like he was planning a dastardly attack. He looked like someone had just punched him in the stomach. And he wasn’t even looking at Will.

“... Richie?”

Mike blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Richie, if this is one of your stupid jokes,” Eddie’s voice was hoarse, like air wasn’t getting down his throat properly, “If it is, it’s not fucking funny.”

He took another step forward, but Will was frozen. He could hear

Lucas' uncomfortable laughter behind him.

"Uh I think you have the wrong person—" Eddie was now close enough that Will could see the wetness around his eyes, and—something else—

Will could hear his blood rushing in his own ears.

"Richie, *please*—"

"Hey, you're that kid I hit with my bike!" Dustin's voice was piercing, but it shattered the tension. Eddie flinched as if he'd been hit, eyes finally dragging away from Mike to the other boy. "Hey, how are your hands? Is that why you're wearing oven mitts?"

Eddie just stared at them for a moment, before turning sharply to Will. His eyes were cold, whatever had been in them before locked away.

"Byers, we need to talk." He held up a stupid-looking, mitten-covered hand before Will could even open his mouth. "Not here."

And just like that, Eddie turned around, marched back over to the abandoned bike and sped off.

No one said anything for a moment. Will clenched his fists so hard he could feel his nails start to cut into his palms.

Max dropped the bag she was holding and put her hands on her hips. "What the hell was that?"

"I've met that kid!"

"Yeah we heard, dipshit—"

"But how does he know Will?"

"What was with the oven mitts—"

"Can we work on my project now—"

Mike didn't speak, and Will dared a glance back. He was still staring

in the direction Eddie had ridden off in, a small furrow between his brows. Maybe he felt the weight of Will's gaze, but when he looked over his mind was elsewhere; like he wasn't really seeing him.

He never sees.

Jonathan pulled up to the curb, honking twice. Will started towards the car, ignoring his friend's loud bickering and protests when they realized what he was doing.

"Will?" Mike finally called, and *dammit*, he was weak. He looked back.

Mike's eyes were clearer. Conflicted. Confused. But he didn't say anything else.

Will thought about the look in Eddie's eyes. He felt the heat in his stomach rise to his cheeks, but there was anger there too.

I have to protect you. All of you.

Will threw himself into the passenger seat.

"Hey, was that Eddie—"

"Jonathan, drive NOW!"

xxx

As soon as they pulled up, Will could already see his bike abandoned in the front yard. He bypassed the house entirely—he knew where Eddie would be.

Sure enough, the other boy was standing in front of Castle Byers, staring at the signs.

HOME OF WILL THE WISE

"I'm here," Will felt like an idiot, but the anger was still coursing

through his veins, “Why would you come to my school? You were supposed to stay here.”

Eddie ignored him, unzipping the little bag he wore across his chest. He struggled until he got so fed up with the oven mitts that he ripped them off and tossed them to the ground. Before pulling something out of the bag and thrusting it in Will’s direction.

He didn’t need to read the title to know what it was. He’d seen it too many times to ever forget. Had studied the black and white of the photo they’d used for both his missing posters and his homecoming like it was someone else’s face entirely. Someone else’s life.

“Where did you get that?” He hated that his voice was shaking.

“They said you were dead.” It wasn’t a question, but Will nodded anyway. “Were you?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“Byers’ mother, Joyce Byers, alleges Will was the subject of a secret government program run by the Hawkins National Laboratory. The allegation comes amidst a massive investigation into the hidden organization and its elaborate experimentations in perusal of mind control.” Eddie read out, just loud enough for the two of them. “You go missing in the woods for a week—fucking weak excuse, by the way—and then... what? You suddenly turn up alive? Fill in the blanks here.”

When Will didn’t respond, the other boy looked like he was about to go feral. “Look Byers—”

“I’m not answering *anything* until you tell me who you are, like I’d believe any of that crap about you being ‘Hopper’s nephew.’ And what was *that* back at the school—” His adrenaline was rushing, and he could feel himself sweating through his t-shirt underneath his jacket.

“I needed to talk to you and I didn’t have time to wait—”

“Stay away from Mike,”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

Something unreadable flickered across Eddie’s face, but it was gone in an instant, “Oh. Mike.”

“And Dustin and Lucas and Max and El—stay away from all of them!”

“Well thank god I don’t take orders from you.” Eddie rolled his eyes, and Will thought *actual* steam might be coming out of his own ears. “Or was that supposed to be a threat?”

“You *are* the threat—” Eddie cut him off with a laugh that felt out of character— loud and ragged at the edges.

“Believe it or not, I’m not the most fucked up thing happening in Hawkins,” Eddie held up the article again, “And if you don’t tell me what you know, this won’t be either.”

Will paused, feeling the fight drain out of him. “Just—who are you?”

The other boy sighed. “Someone who’s stuck here until this shit gets fixed.”

This wasn’t going how Will had expected. He shifted his weight—in the sudden quiet he could hear the dead leaves crack beneath his feet, the moan of the trees as the wind.

“I don’t trust you.”

The other boy shrugged. Though there was no lighter or match present, a corner of the paper in his hand sparked into a small flame, eating away at the black ink.

“Either help me, or risk your life and the lives of everyone you love. Because what’s coming doesn’t care how many times you’ve survived before. In fact,” Will watched as the paper burned, ashes flaking off into the wind.

“That might make It even more excited to kill you.”

Notes for the Chapter:

am I a ho for the drama or what

me: I want this story to have compelling yet semi-realistic pacing

also me: never gets all the way through each chapter outline because i'm too busy writing over 1000 words of eddie sitting in a LIBRARY

on another note these twitter smaugs are R U I N I N G M Y L I F E. People are so fucking creative-- please drop your fave in the comments below! I am up to date on SNL, DerryUniversity, Cut The Strings, On The Rocks, Reddie or Not and TC2.

And thanks for the sweet love <3 see you soon

8. Untouchable

As they drove down the dirt roads leading away from the Byers' house, Eddie couldn't help but notice that Hopper's Chevy Blazer was sort of a piece of shit.

He'd always liked cars, liked the logic of working on them. In high school he'd tried to get an after-school job at a local garage, until his mother had caught him writing cover letters and had a fit so catastrophic, he'd promised to never even go near the place again.

The Chevy probably wasn't that old—late 70's, he estimated— but the body had clearly seen better days: rust had started to gather around the tire wells from wet Indiana winters and the paint was scraped away near the headlights. Inside the dark grey faux leather was scuffed and torn in some places, and it had that faintly nauseating, stale smell of fast food.

They hit a bump. Jane giggled a little from next to him.

The shocks feel a little shot. Brakes need tightening, tires probably could be realigned.

Not to mention that the thing *barely* had seatbelts, and that they were sitting three across in front, and god *knows* the airbags would probably kill them if a full-frontal collision didn't get to it first—

Another, bigger bump. The momentary weightlessness made Jane yelp and set Hopper laughing. From where he was slumped against the window, Eddie tried not to smile. He shifted his eyes to the swiftly passing trees lining the road.

There was something weirdly soothing about the familiar hum of an engine, the rumbling of the ground flying past beneath their feet, the way his brain calmed as the scenery blurred outside. His mother had once mentioned offhand that his dad used to take him on car rides when he was too fussy to sleep, and Eddie'd locked it tight in his heart with the blurry, faceless memories he had left of the man. After that, whenever they got in the car he'd close his eyes and pretend, just for a moment, that it was his dad in the driver's seat. Someone

he could trust to get him home safely.

I don't trust you. Will's face flashed through his mind.

Yeah kid, I wouldn't trust me either.

Eddie wasn't sure "intimidate the children until they did what he wanted" was the same as "saving" them, but it was really for their own fucking good, so he tried not to feel bad about it. Will's little self-righteous stand in the woods had been so nostalgic it sort of made him want to hurl. "Protecting your friends" and "demanding answers"—

You can think you're protecting your friends and then you forget each other for thirty years and there's no answers and there's no closure and Stan's gone and even though you figured out how to kill it, you're too weak to help them, and you bleed out deep below the surface of the Earth, just hoping that the only guy you've ever really loved doesn't try to stay and die with you.

God, he was tired.

It'd been a full day since, and Eddie had sort of hoped Will would cough up what he knew before he was forced to go stay with Hopper, but no such luck. On the contrary, Will had been avoiding Eddie like the plague, staying silent through dinners and locking himself in his room after.

Fuckin' teenagers, man.

Jonathan had alerted Joyce to Eddie's little renegade trip to the school, so he'd been stuck in the house the following day so she could "spend time getting to know him" which was a convenient way to say "keep his ass on lockdown." Eddie liked Joyce—unnervingly knowing as her look could be sometimes—but if Will wasn't going to spill the beans, he needed to get back to the library to see what he could dig up about the mysterious Hawkins National Lab.

Joyce asked him at dinner if he wanted to attend school one day. He'd managed to distract her until the topic was forgotten, and only felt a little guilty about the singed tablecloth.

He hadn't actually meant to go to the school.

THE BOY WHO CAME BACK TO LIFE

Or maybe he did.

A gaggle of kids stood huddled on the steps in front of Hawkins Middle, and Eddie recognized Will's bowl cut instantly from the back. He hit the breaks on the bike, fully prepared to drag the other boy away and demand an explanation for what he'd seen, but suddenly Will shifted and Eddie could see—

The boy standing behind Will looked up, and for the second time that day, Eddie's world fell apart.

"... Richie?"

It was uncanny. From closer he could see the curve of the boy's nose, the hollows of his cheeks, the pout of his lips—a face he thought he'd never see again, at this age or any other.

"Richie, if this is one of your stupid jokes," Could it be possible, the turtle had sent Richie here too? Did that mean Richie was dead? Did that mean Eddie wouldn't be alone? "If it is, it's not fucking funny."

But the impossible boy stared at him with those impossible eyes, unknowing. There was no mischievous glint or glimmer of humor lying in wait, no unspoken understanding. No hint that maybe, just maybe, there was more to them than the performance they gave the rest of the world.

"Richie, please—"

'I know you, I know you, please know me too—'

"Hey, you're that kid I hit with my bike!"

The moment shattered.

He didn't last long after that—the conversation he'd wanted to have with Will would have to happen elsewhere—and he didn't let himself look back at the kid before he biked away as fast as his young legs could carry him.

A kid. A fucking kid who wasn't Richie, who looked at Eddie like he'd never seen him before. Like Eddie wasn't any more important than anyone else, like he was less, even, than that. Like he was just some stranger. Some weirdo ruining his nice, normal time with his nice, normal friends.

His cheeks burned, eyes watered. The disappointment was almost dizzying.

'Wherever you've ended up, Richie Tozier doesn't exist here. Stop wishing, you sad fuck. You're on your own.'

His palms grew warm, and he could faintly smell smoke all the way back to the Byers'.

"Eddie," Jane's sweet, quiet voice broke through the memory, "we're home."

xxx

Hopper's nerves started to get to him, pulling up to the cabin.

He was barely qualified to take care of one teen former experiment, let alone two. And El—El was easy. Once she trusted you, she was sweet and relatively easy to please: he'd gotten by on almost a year of Eggo waffle creations, western movies and ice cream sandwiches, hadn't he?

(Okay, so there might have been some fights in between there that led to a sudden surprise trip to Chicago, but no one's perfect.)

Eddie was... different.

Joyce pulled him aside as soon as he walked through the door.

"El sweetie, you can go get Eddie, he's in Will's room." She dropped to a whisper. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Why are we whispering? Does he have super hearing too?"

"Stop it, I just—I've noticed some things." She crossed her arms, "I've been watching him and he won't eat anything until someone else has eaten it first—either off his plate or communally."

"So he's... picky?"

"Jim, I swear to god—" She let out a deep, exasperated sound, "He scopes out the exits in every room he's in, he's cagey as hell. Plus he's got," she tapped her left cheek.

"You think he was abused." He mused, and she nodded, head down. "If he came out of one of those labs, I wouldn't be surprised."

"He's not entirely like El," which, in his opinion was the understatement of the year, "he said he had parents, once?"

"So did she—"

"Parents that he remembers. Even if they died a while back, you think they could have given him that scar?"

"The scar is old, but not that old." Hopper thought it was more likely from whoever is the reason he was there. "But we'll just have to find out, won't we?"

She smiled a little, still nervous, but it made his heart flip over anyway. "Just... be careful with him, okay? He's just a kid. Try not to set him off anymore than I already know you will."

He put a hand over his chest, "Scout's honor."

She laughed. "You've never been a boy scout in your life—"

El was practically vibrating with excitement as he put the truck into park. "He's already been here before, kiddo."

"Lives here now!"

She had already pushed Eddie out of the car and up the steps to the deck, leaving Hopper to grab the boy's small bag of "belongings" Joyce had provided from the trunk. He followed them inside, putting a hand up before El could drag the poor boy into her small bedroom.

"Alright, hold up a second," they paused, and Eddie turned to those dark eyes to scowl at him but didn't try to wrench out of El's loose grip, "A coupla things. That's El's room, as you know, and mine's there—you'll sleep in the loft," he gestured to the small wooden ladder in the corner that led to the space above El's bedroom. It had taken the better part of the last few days to clear it of most of his grandfather's old junk and make it habitable again. "It's nothing fancy, but, you know, it'll do for now."

Eddie nodded, but there was something expectant in his gaze. "And?"

Hopper resisted the urge to sigh. "While you're living here, we need to establish some ground rules. Rule number one—and this is El's rule too—you do not leave the house unless properly accompanied by me or Joyce."

The hackles immediately rose. "You—"

"Rule number two," he cut him off loudly, "You do not talk to anyone that hasn't been approved by me or Joyce."

"You can't, fucking, *imprison* me here against my will—"

"Christ, again with the dramatics—you're not a fucking prisoner."

The outrage on this kid's face was sort of priceless. "I'm sorry, what do you think that word means? Do you have any idea what goes on in the U.S. prison system, asshole? It's royally fucked is what it is—"

"It's not forever, okay?" Hopper could feel a migraine coming on and boy, this one was gonna be a doozy. "It's just until we can figure out what's going on."

The kid shot him the most unimpressed look he could muster. "People already think I'm your nephew, why can't we just leave it at that? You carry on with your life and I'll do what I need to do." Eddie crossed his arms, and El's hand fell away. She didn't seem like she minded, eyes a little distant in thought.

"Newsflash, kid: this is a small town. Everybody knows everybody, so the more time you spend out talking to people, the more people are going to start to question why they've never heard me talk about a

wayward sister or brother.” *Or their pyromaniac nutcase son.* “Besides, what could you possibly need to do? Take more joyrides to the middle school?”

Eddie mumbled something under his breath, and Hopper prepared for another round of verbal jousting, but the boy stayed quiet after that.

“What, no more complaints, your majesty?”

He rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. “Any more rules?”

“Don’t eat all the Eggos in one sitting,” he gave a pointed look at his other ward, “and if you do need to go burn stuff down, just make sure it’s not mine.”

“How very democratic of you.”

“This ain’t a democracy, kid,” Hopper gave a restrained chuckle, “It’s a dang dictatorship.”

Suddenly a pillow flew off the couch nearby and clobbered him in the side of the head. Eddie’s surprised cackle and El’s smothered giggles were muted under the weight of the upholstery.

Okay, point made.

xxx

So the loft in Hopper’s cabin was certainly *not* the Four Seasons Manhattan, but Eddie could make do. He’d endured Jane giving him another tour after Hopper’s, properly introducing him to ten or twelve stuffed animals that lived in her room and explaining their weekly television habits, with good humor. It was hard to say no to her eager smile, and if he recognized the slightly frenzied chatter of a lonely child, well... it took one to know one. Finally, after an hour, he’d begged off and climbed the short wooden ladder up to the loft.

Maybe, a week ago, a month ago, a year ago, he’d have recoiled at

the remaining cobwebs that hung between the ceiling beams, or at the missed patches of dust illuminated by a small circular window. He'd have felt his throat close up at the mere idea of sleeping in a cabin that had seen better days with people he barely knew.

But now as he collapsed onto the small mattress tucked over by the wall, he only felt latent memories tickling the back of his mind—afternoons strewn across the hayloft of the Hanlon's barn, sleeping off the few early mornings they came over to help Mike with chores. They'd collapse into the soft straw, eyes already half shut, letting the safety of their togetherness lull them to sleep. Those moments felt like they were bathed in gold.

Curled up on a small mattress alone, Eddie closed his eyes, and sank into darkness.

xxx

It was raining.

Eddie couldn't feel the rain, he just had a vague understanding it was there. He could see things—the dim light of the streetlamp, the wet sheen of the asphalt below it. He could hear too, the crashing of millions of tiny droplets across surfaces, sometimes the hum of a car going down the road.

And closer to him, footsteps.

A man walked quickly down the sidewalk, towards a building with a discreet, albeit neon red, sign.

The Falcon.

Eddie followed the man. He couldn't feel if he was taking steps—it was like one moment he was behind the man in the rain, the next moment he's standing behind him as he approaches the counter. Sort of like using street view on Google Maps, he thought errantly; picking a point, rushing through space and time, suddenly you're there.

The Falcon was a bar. A mostly empty one, but a bar nonetheless.

The man was already taking a seat, back hunched and face hidden from view. Eddie got closer, sliding onto a stool beside him, and the man pulled down the hood of his raincoat.

‘Richie?’

Eddie couldn’t feel the seat beneath him, couldn’t feel the counter under his fingertips, but he could want.

And did he ever want. He wanted to push the wet locks from Richie’s forehead and run his hand through his hair, take his glasses and clean them of the rainwater that must make it impossible to see, divest him of his wet outer layers and wrap him up in something warm. He wanted to put his hands on Richie’s cheeks, run them over the overgrown stubble growing there, to soothe the deep, dark circles that bloomed beneath his eyes, the world’s saddest half moons.

But his friend didn’t acknowledge him. Just ordered from the barkeep in a low, hoarse voice that didn’t match Eddie’s memory of the lively tone from the Jade, or even the last desperate pleas that echoed through the cistern.

‘Richie—’

“He can’t hear you, Eddie.”

Eddie turned to find the dark, hunched, silhouette sitting further down the bar from them.

“It’s not time yet.” The voice continued, as the shape of what could be a man wearing a very large backpack rose from the bar. He couldn’t see the man’s face very clearly, but he had an inkling of who it might be. Before he could respond, the figure lumbered out the door, attracting no one else’s notice.

Eddie turned back to Richie, who by this time had almost finished what looked like a couple of fingers of bourbon, and was waving down the bartender for another.

‘Is this real?’ He asked out loud, wishing desperately for Richie to turn to him, to see the light in his eyes and hear his laughter and wipe this sad

portrait away. But Richie didn't turn, just stared down at his hands clasped together on the counter. From his pocket Eddie could hear the vibration of a phone, over and over. Was it his manager, trying to reschedule those dates in Reno he'd missed? A girlfriend, wondering where her partner was? A boyfriend? Or had the Losers finally made a groupchat, an attempt to stay connected across the rift of time and space that had kept them separate for twenty-something years? A groupchat with no Eddie, no Stan.

Eddie glanced up and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror wall behind the bar. He was 40 again. His cheek had a knife in it. Blood was gushing from his chest.

'I'll be right back.' He whispered. He reached up to brush a hand over Richie's, splayed across the counter, but still felt nothing. Richie didn't respond.

Outside, the rain was coming down even harder, but Eddie only had eyes for the shadowy standing below the nearby street light. Between raindrops the figure flickered as if struggling to keep shape.

"It's time to go, Eddie. You have a job to do."

He grit his teeth and shook his head. 'Richie is here, he's waiting for me.'

The turtle tilted its near formless head to the side.

"He will have to wait a bit longer."

The rain suddenly came down harder, and Eddie couldn't see anything anymore.

xxx

El had been stacking cards into little triangles when she felt Eddie wake up. Building "houses" out of cards had been one of Jim's rainy-day activities, and she found it oddly soothing to focus on leaning the delicate weights against each other. (She'd once tried to do it with

her powers, but had almost thrown the whole table through the wall instead.)

She waited patiently as he made his way down from the loft and shuffled over towards the kitchen table. He wore a pair of too-big sweatpants rolled up around his ankles and what must have been one of Jonathan's old band t-shirts. She had the odd urge to coo at how cute he looked, sleepily rubbing at his eyes.

"No Hopper?" He mumbled. She shook her head.

"Went to work."

"Thank god, meddling old man. Thinks he can fucking tell me what to do." Eddie looked at her with those big eyes, making the face Jim made sometimes when he didn't quite know what to make of something. "You just let him talk to you like that?"

"Jim is Jim." She shrugged, placing another card. "He wants to protect."

He snorted, snatching a card from the pile, "I don't need protecting."

The card began to smoke where he clenched it—he dropped it with a yelp, but a little flame caught on the other cards. El calmly grabbed the glass of lemonade she'd been drinking and poured it over the fledgling fire. Her house of cards fluttered to the tabletop.

He coughed.

"The powers are... new."

El grabbed a towel from the kitchen counter and threw it over the puddle before nodding. "Is that why you were sick?"

"I'm NOT sick."

The ferocity of Eddie's snarl startled her, a little. He wasn't looking at her, eyes locked on the fallen card house, but his stare could have "bored holes through a steel wall" as Jim might say. They were quiet for a moment. She didn't know what to say. He'd been sick—pale and hungry and hot to the touch—but he didn't... like to be reminded of

it?

“Sorry.” He mumbled. For scaring her or for the card house or the lemonade seeping into the wood, she didn’t know.

El shrugged. She supposed she didn’t much like getting sick either.

“If you’re not sick, show me.”

He finally looked up at her, confused. She wiggled her fingers at him. “I want to see.”

“Jane, I don’t want to hurt you—”

El stuck out a hand towards the recycling bin, using her powers to lift an empty can of beer until it floated towards them.

“I was born an experiment,” she said slowly, enunciating the way Jim had made her practice. She wanted to make sure she was clear, “Bad men saw my powers and tried to make me theirs. They trained me. Everyday, over and over.”

The can spun in the air, first lazily, and then faster and faster. Eddie’s eyes followed it until it was just a blur in their tiny kitchen.

“Made me kill.”

El closed her fist, and the can crushed in on itself with a desperate squeak. She released her hand, and it clattered to the tabletop. Eddie’s eyes followed it, entranced.

“You’re new.” She swept her hand in the air and the crushed can went flying back into the recycling bin with a vicious accuracy. “New powers, no training. I want to help.”

“You want to train me?” He seemed surprised. “Why?”

“Bad things happen, Eddie.” She said it simply, like the fact that it was. “And more bad things are coming. I feel it.”

Will didn't know what the fuck to do.

So he tried to ignore it.

He got up, went to school, hung out with the Party, came home, avoided Eddie, ate dinner, went to bed. Wash, rinse, repeat. At least Eddie seemed to have gotten whatever memo Will was trying to send, and hadn't pursued him after that first day.

That morning Eddie left to go live with Hopper, and Will hadn't stayed long enough to even say goodbye, asking Jonathan to drive him to school early. He wanted to feel relieved—his home would be a safe space again, the threat gone.

But... was it?

"I'm not the most fucked up thing happening in Hawkins."

The words refused to leave his mind. They'd been incident-free for months now—no sign of the feds or weird doctors, giving Will the time to try and figure out the medium between being a possessed monster and a normal kid. He wanted, so desperately, for this chapter of their lives to be over.

But rarely did he get what he wanted.

He'd spend the evening at Mike's, but even the Party was more out of sorts than normal since Eddie had shown up at school. Dustin had badgered him for a while—apparently he'd run into Eddie before, downtown somewhere—before realizing Will wasn't going to spill about it. Lucas and Max had short of shrugged it off, but there was an awkwardness to their dynamic that was half Eddie, half dealing with their complicated on-and-off relationship within the group. Mike—well, for once, Will didn't want to think about Mike.

They'd tried to get a game of RISK going, but even Will felt too squirrely to invest in it. They'd ended up putting on a movie, but he'd left before the end. Everything, the sound, the dark, the presence of

other people, felt like too much.

"What's coming doesn't care how many times you've survived before."

He took his normal route home via Mirkwood, biking because Jonathan and Nancy were at the Byer's already, studying. The darkness of early March felt as deep as deep winter, and the trees creaked ominously in the wind. He'd grown up in their house in the woods, and he'd always felt like they'd protected him from the harsh world outside—until a year and a half ago, when everything had changed.

His bike hit a rock, and he slowed, struggling to stay upright. At that moment, he heard the distinct cry of someone—or something—from the forest to his left. The urge to flee was deep and immediate, but... what if someone was hurt?

Will pulled his flashlight from his bag—he rarely left home without it — and peered out into the darkness.

Please let it be nothing, please let it be nothing—

He sucked in a deep breath. "Hello? I-is someone there?"

A whimper. He took a few steps closer to the forest line, scanning slowly with his flashlight, until he caught something soft and pink, sprawled across the forest floor several yards ahead.

Will ran.

"Erica?"

His best friend's little sister, in a pink flannel nightgown and nothing else to combat the early spring chill. She was lying on her side, bleeding from a deep cut that ran several inches down her leg. Her feet were bare and filthy.

She turned her head, and Will stepped back. Where her eyes should have been a deep brown to match her brother's, they were a foggy white. A chill went down his spine.

"E-Erica? It's me, W-Will? Will Byers?"

She blinked several times, and he watched with horror as her eyes cleared, brown irises wet and shining as they turned up towards him.

“Will? Where—where am I?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi hello yes I'm sorry. Life got crazy-- I lost my job, I got a new job, I'm working 40+ hours a week (happily) but I'm very tired much of the time. I made this chapter a little long as a "please forgive me" <3 (also this fic is officially 60 pages long in my word doc what the fuck)

S/O to the people in my comments-- when I was having the worst days, your comments lifted me up and gave me the strength to come back to this after so long. Much love to you guys <3

In other news I'm on clowntown twitter at @odetoblue1 if you are so inclined. I don't deal in a lot of explicit stuff but please don't follow if you are under 18 tho, to be safe :) And thank you to everyone who has given me smau recs!

Stay safe, wear a mask, and if you are in the USA, haven't yet and you are able, please vote!

9. Training Day

The Sinclairs were, for lack of a better word, confused when Will showed up at their door with their daughter, who was supposed to be upstairs sleeping, on the back of his bike.

“Oh honey, honey,” Mrs. Sinclair fussed over Erica, who was being very brave and had stifled most of her cries as her bleeding leg had been jostled on the ride back. She swept her daughter up and immediately took her back towards the kitchen, muttering about “calling the doctor” and “stitches”.

“Thank you, Will, for bringing her home,” Mr. Sinclair’s tone was kind, but his eyes held the same bewildered disbelief they’d had when he’d opened the door, still trying to grasp the situation. “We raised a sleepwalker, who could have known?”

Will had always liked Mr. Sinclair—liked that he was generally even-tempered and that he told funny jokes that made Lucas scoff and roll his eyes in embarrassment. But in this moment, all Will could see was a man who lived a life above the surface of Hawkins, who had no reason to fear creatures who went bump in the night or might know why children might disappear from their beds without warning.

He nodded and smiled tightly, said goodnight and turned to leave when a small voice called out his name. Mrs. Sinclair stepped back into the foyer, expression harried.

“Will, she’s asking for you—would you mind terribly, hon? I need to call Dr. Victor.”

“No, it’s fine Mrs. Sinclair,” his stomach sank as he stepped towards the bright light of the kitchen. Erica was seated on the counter, looking smaller than he’d ever seen her.

“Will,” she said, her voice raspy, “I have a message, and you need to remember.”

Eddie didn't really know what to expect from Jane's "training".

They'd spent the remainder of the previous day clearing a space maybe twenty yards from the cabin that Jane dubbed their "training ground." They found some rakes in the shed and Eddie tore away the debris from the forest floor—anything remotely flammable—while Jane used her power to supplant extra dirt over grassy areas that would be more likely to catch. The area certainly wasn't foolproof, but it would do for the moment.

Jane dragged him outside as soon as Hopper's truck was out of sight, and all that Eddie could think of with were classic movie montages of characters sweating and pumping iron to win the next match. The *Rocky* theme played idly through his head, which Richie would have loved.

Does Hawkins even have a flight of stairs that big?

It seemed unlikely.

But there were no weight bags, no running in the blistering heat or cold, no sage advice to win the day. Just Eddie, Jane, and the woods.

"Do it."

"Do what?"

Jane wiggled her fingers at him. "Fire hands."

"I—I don't know how," She looked unimpressed, "No, seriously, it just happens, I don't have any control over it."

"Why we practice." She plucked a few dead leaves from the edge of their little training ground and walked over to press them into his hands.

Eddie looked down at his palms, which had mostly healed from his fall and subsequent romp through the woods the week before. They

still looked like is normal hands—well, his hands when he'd been thirteen at least.

“Close your eyes.”

Ever suspicious, he looked up at her. God damn, why did he have to be so short at thirteen? “Why? Are you gonna throw something at me?”

She giggled, but shook her head. “We will find your point.”

“My what—”

“Shhhh, so much talking. Be quiet.” A little aghast, he clamped his mouth together with a clicking sound. Jane moved her hand and made the leaves he held rise into the air. “My power is my mind: opening, closing, finding, moving. When I use my power, it comes from my point.” She tapped her forehead, between her eyes, very lightly with one finger. The leaves remained suspended, spinning very slowly in the air. “Keeps me steady, focused.”

“So my point is there too?”

“Maybe—maybe not.” She shivered a little against a chilly wind and pulled the sleeves of her jacket down. The leaves dropped back into Eddie's hands. “Now close your eyes.”

Despite still being a little distrustful he wasn't going to end up with a face full of dirt, Eddie did as she asked. He heard her take a few steps back.

“Now think about your power. Where do you feel it?”

“I don't feel it.”

“Try.”

“I *am* trying.”

This is so stupid. Who the fuck thought I'd be a good candidate for superpowers?

His mind wandered to hours of sitting in Richie's room as a kid, binge reading issues of X-Men and Spider-man and talking about how awesome it'd be to be able to fly or become invisible or walk on walls the way heroes could. He'd always claimed he preferred reading them at Richie's so he didn't have to worry about his mom bugging him, but there was something about reclining together on Richie's bed, arms brushing, blue eyes soft when they turned to him—

You're braver than you think.'

"Eddie," Jane's voice broke through his reverie, and Eddie snapped his eyes open to see the leaves in his hands had caught a little on the points making contact with his skin, not quite on fire but definitely smoking. Jane cocked her head at him.

"Good start. Where did you feel it?"

"I—I don't know, I wasn't really thinking about it," Eddie sputtered. Jane, to her credit, did not give him the exasperated look he would have given himself in her position.

"What were you thinking about?"

"That's none of your business," he snapped, more out of habit than actual anger. He dropped the smoking leaves and walked to the edge of the circle before taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I don't want to talk about it."

A few seconds passed, then a quiet, "Okay."

THWAP.

"OW!"

"Sorry," Jane said, not sounding sorry at all, "that one was a bit big."

Eddie turned to see what had just smacked him in the back of the head, and saw a suspiciously large piece of bark lying harmlessly near his feet. He gaped, pointing at the culprit.

"Are you INSANE? You could have given me a fucking concussion—"

A small branch from outside the circle flew past his head, and this girl had the audacity to *smirk* at him.

“Whoops.”

“What the fu—stop that! Do you know how fucking dangerous that is, you reckless little gremlin—”

“Make me.”

More things went sailing through the air towards him—pieces of bark, clumps of dead leaves, even a few small rocks. Jane moved a hand beside her like she was bored.

He tried to retaliate, for a while, flinging the fallen objects back in her direction, but the whole psychic ability really put her at an advantage. By the time he'd had enough there was a layer of foliage beneath him thick enough to cover his feet entirely.

“Okay, OKAY I GET IT, just STOP—”

Immediately the oncoming projectiles dropped to the ground.

“You’re lucky that wasn’t a fair fight,” he mumbled, brushing dirt off his borrowed coat and pulling leaves from his hair. Jane didn’t respond, just looked at him expectantly.

He sighed. “I was thinking... about my friend.”

“Your friend?” There was excitement in her tone, and Eddie turned from where he’d been trying to brush the sticks and leaves back outside the circle to stare at her.

“Uh, yeah?”

“What kind of friend?”

“My... my best friend,” And though he hadn’t seen Richie in over twenty years, the truth of the statement settled comfortably in his bones, “I guess.”

“Friends are good,” Jane nodded, walking closer, “Where is your

friend?”

A lump threatened to form in his throat, “He’s... they’re—I had to leave him behind. To save him.”

“In the not-lab?”

“What? Oh, yeah, sure. The not-lab.”

Jane took his hand and tugged, leading him back to the center of the training ground, where they’d started the day.

“Close your eyes,” she ordered again, letting go of his hands and he did it without complaint, “Now think of your friend.”

Eddie took a deep breath to tamp down the blush he could feel rising to his cheeks, but where there was Richie, there was heat. It felt the same as it always did, like lava in his veins, but this time he tried to follow the flow inside to the source.

He thought about Jane tapping her forehead, her point, but his mind felt calm, almost a little empty in a strange but not unpleasant way. He’d very briefly tried meditation in college and though it hadn’t worked for him often, when it did it sort of felt like this. Awake, aware, but still.

No, the chaos, the churning, the source of the heat within him was elsewhere.

Unconsciously, he lifted a finger to his forehead and slowly traced down his face and his throat, until he reached the top of his sternum. Through his shirt he felt the slightly raised edges of his scar. The scar that ran through his chest, punctured the lungs that had always given him trouble like an overbearing mother, burst the heart that had been running overtime since he had walked into the Jade and seen Mike and Bill and every atom of his being had said “Oh, I know you.”

The scar that had saved Richie from the Deadlights, that had kept his most important people safe.

Oh. Duh.

Eddie's point was not his mind, like Jane's, because Eddie's mind had been used and abused against him over and over by space aliens and earthly horrors alike. No, the source and conduit of his power, was his heart.

"How does it feel?" Jane asked.

He held his hand flat against his chest, and took a deep breath in, and out. The heat swirled within him, expanding and contracting and flowing outward, an impossible, eternal force. It would be easy, he thought, to get lost in the tide of it, but the reminder of his friends, of what he'd given for them, of what the placement of his scar meant, kept him moored to his own shore.

"It feels... good," he responded, eyes still closed, "Like an anchor."

"Bitchin." Eddie was so startled that he laughed, opening his eyes. Jane was grinning wide at him, and he couldn't help but match it.

"Let's eat lunch. Then more practice." She started walking towards the house. He took a second to cool down before following.

"Eddie?"

"Yeah?"

"What's an anchor?"

xxx

Will hadn't even had to fake sickness to get his mom to let him stay home from school.

The nightmares had been so bad, he'd barely slept. Over and over, the faces of those he loved showed up, white-eyed and gaping at him; sometimes blood gushed from their mouths or wounds on their bodies, but they paid them no mind, only getting closer and closer to him with a zombie-like intensity. He'd finally gotten out of bed and

done laps around the living room until falling into deep dreamlessness on the couch.

Joyce had taken one look at his dark under eyes and pale complexion and announced he'd be staying home.

Still, she wasn't working till that afternoon, so Will had to endure several hours of laying in bed, waiting, before he heard her car pull out of the drive. He dressed quickly, grabbed his bike, and was off.

He'd only been to the cabin where they now knew Hopper had been keeping Eleven once before, but it was one of the only places that deep in the woods, so he found it hard to forget—and pretty eerie, if he were being completely honest. That being said, it was safer for her to be where busybody neighbors couldn't walk down the street and see her moving shit with her mind through the window, like in Mike and Lucas' neighborhood.

The ride was short, but Will didn't really notice, Erica's words ringing through his head. The look in her eyes, before and after.

Soon enough he was pulling up to the old cabin, but no one responded when he knocked on the door.

"E-Eleven?" He called tentatively, before the sound of footsteps made him turn around. El appeared around the corner of the cabin's porch, smiling like she knew he'd be there.

"Hi Will."

"Uh, hi, sorry to bother you, I'm just—"

Her smile didn't fade. "Here for Eddie?"

He nodded—he was used to feeling a little stupid around girls his age, but not ones who also had psychic and maybe mind-reading abilities. She just gestured for him to follow her back the way she'd come.

They went behind the cabin a ways off, and through the trees Will could make out a figure holding what seemed to be a bright orange, flickering light. As they got closer, it became clearer.

“Hey Jane, check it out—oh.” Sitting in Eddie’s cupped hand, was a small, flickering flame. Will stared. “It’s you.”

“Will came to talk.” El kept moving toward the other boy while Will stopped at the edge of the large dirt circle. She put out a hand towards Eddie’s flame, and it sputtered and died.

“Hey, I was working on that—” she gave Eddie a smile that could almost be smug. The other boy sighed.

“Fine,” he crossed his arms and looked at Will, as if to say, *‘you wanted to talk, so talk.’*

Will took a deep breath, willing away the terrified voice shrieking in the back of his head.

“You wanted to know about what happened to me, right? Where I went when everyone thought I was missing?”

Eddie didn’t nod, didn’t move an inch, but his eyes didn’t stray.

“I’ll tell you,” he grit his teeth, “but you have to help me.” The shorter boy opened his mouth, but Will cut him off, “Last night I was riding home and I found my best friend’s little sister in the woods, alone—she didn’t remember how she’d gotten there.”

“Seems like a running theme in this town.”

Will felt his temper start to rise, but beat it back. “This was different.” He told them about approaching Erica, the blank look on her face, the whites in her eyes, watching it all fade until she was just a child left shivering in the early spring frost.

“We’re used to monsters around here,” he said softly, and for the first time since he’d started talking, he saw Eddie’s expression shift slightly, saw the softening of his gaze, “but this one came with you.”

The other boy stiffened, but Will didn’t stop.

“Before I left last night, Erica told me something—a message,” He pulled the small piece of paper from where it had been burning a hole in his back pocket, and held it out in front of him, “she said it’s

the last thing she remembered hearing before I found her.”

Eddie took the paper from Will and slowly unfolded it.

xxx

‘It’s time to pay the piper, Eddie.’

An involuntary burst of flame engulfed the small paper, but Eddie didn’t need to read it twice. The words had already burned themselves into his retinas.

He’d waited too long.

He’d waited too long, and now Pennywise was ready to play.

No one is dead yet. You still have a chance.

He took a deep breath.

Jane stepped toward him, put a hand on his shoulder, “Eddie?”

He ignored her concern, choosing instead to look back up at Will. “Can you take me to her?” The Byers boy was obviously hesitant, but Eddie persisted. “I have to see if she knows anything—I have to know what she saw.”

There was a standstill for a moment, but eventually Will nodded, “We have to go right now though, before Lucas gets home.”

“Let’s go.”

“I’m coming too,” Jane stated simply, and Will winced a little.

“Ah, Eleven, I don’t know if that’s—”

“Lucas is my friend too.” She looked at him, and Eddie, who was starting to learn her gazes the way one might learn a new language, felt a little sorry for the other boy. That was her *don’t fuck with me*

face and it was pretty compelling.

Sure enough, Will mumbled a “fine, whatever” and the matter was settled.

It took them a while to make it to the Sinclair’s house, which was in an upscale neighborhood a few miles away, and a careful maneuvering of three people on two bikes (one Will’s, one an old thing Jane pulled from Hopper’s shed) but they made it.

“Mrs. Sinclair goes to her book club every Thursday at 2:30,” Will whispered as they stashed their bikes behind some bushes and waited. After only a few moments, a well-dressed Black woman left the house through the garage and climbed into a station wagon. As soon as the car was out of sight, they approached the front and Will procured a spare key from beneath an ornamental plant holder.

“I’ve known Lucas since we were seven,” he offered as an explanation, not that Eddie had asked—or needed one. He’d been over to Bill’s house so many times as a kid he could have told you every hiding place the Denbrough’s had. Before Georgie died, that is.

That was why he was here, wasn’t it? No more missing siblings.

No more Georgies.

They stepped inside, quiet but for the sound of daytime infomercials playing softly from a room nearby. Will gestured for them to stay by the door for a minute, which Eddie got—he didn’t want to scare the girl, especially after the night she’d apparently had.

Will disappeared around the corner and they heard soft talking. Jane fidgeted beside him, taking in the upper-middle class grandeur of the house, her eyes raking over every surface. She caught her own reflection in a nearby mirror and touched her hair with a smile. Eddie tried to avoid looking at himself.

After a moment Will reappeared and beckoned them over. In the middle of the large living room, tucked into a large couch, was the form of a girl in purple sweats, colorful baubles in her hair.

“Erica, this is Eddie.”

The flinch was visceral, and Eddie should have expected it, given what her last message had been, but it was still hard to see. He couldn't really blame her.

Eddie approached slowly, and stopped a few feet away. He held up one hand and waved in a lame sort of way.

"Hi Erica."

She eyed him, but it was tired and not as suspicious as they could have been. "Hi Eddie." Her gaze drifted behind him. "Who's she?"

"Jane," he said immediately before Will could start sputtering, "she's my... sister."

Where did that come from?

He tried to shake it off, "Did Will tell you I wanted to talk, Erica?"

She nodded, carefully, and pulled the blanket she was wrapped in tighter around her. "About last night."

"Yeah," he watched as her gaze drifted again to behind him and he made a "shoo" motion at Will and Jane with his hand. Will scuff his feet on the wood floor reluctantly.

"We'll be right in the hallway, okay Erica?" As soon as she nodded, he and Jane stepped out of sight.

Now that it was just the two of them, Eddie felt both slightly more comfortable and *far* more awkward. He'd never been particularly good with kids, and now he had Erica's undivided attention.

"Can you tell me—"

She stiffened a little. "I don't remember much."

He paused, taking in the girl before him. She was young—barely even double digits maybe, but he wasn't great at telling that sort of thing. She was still cocooned in her blankets and seemed impossibly small. There was a fierceness in her eyes, but they were wary.

She's been through a life threatening situation, have a little empathy, you fuck.

It had been a long time since he'd been a child—well, before a week ago—and it was easy to forget how alarming all of this was when the world was so much bigger than you.

“It’s okay,” he sat lightly on the couch a safe few feet away, keeping his hands where she could see them, “whatever you can remember, I’d like to know.”

“Why?”

The grand question Eddie had been asking himself for the last several weeks. It sounded so simple coming from the mouth of a child.

“I’ve had this happen before,” (sort of, kind of, but he didn’t think she’d be comforted by semantics), “and I’m here to make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else.”

She didn’t say anything for a few moments, and he tried not to fidget, focusing instead on the low drone from the TV still playing in the background. Finally, she nodded.

“I went to bed like normal—and then it was like someone was... *talking* to me.”

“In a dream?”

“I guess—I mean, I thought I was dreaming.” She thought for a second, “You know how you dream crazy things, but when you’re in the dream they make sense? I didn’t really think about it.”

He nodded.

“But the voice was nice to me, asking me questions about things I like. It kept saying it wanted to show me something, so I think I was following it.”

“Did you know where you were?”

“You mean did I know I had left my warm house and was walking

around freezing Indiana in the middle of the night?” The level of sass caught Eddie a little off guard, “No. I didn’t feel it at all—getting up, leaving the house, walking that far. All I could think of was the voice.”

"So you didn't see anything? At all? Not a monster or a balloon or... I don't know, a clown?" She was looking at him weird, so he coughed a little to cover his rising anxiety. “Do you know what the voice sounded like, at least?”

Erica was already shaking her head, “I don’t remember, but I know towards the end, when Will was talking to me, the voice... changed. It was meaner, like it was mad or something. That’s when it told me the message for you.

It’s time to pay the piper, Eddie.

But what did it mean?

“Erica—”

A door opened somewhere behind him, and Eddie heard unfamiliar voices.

xxx

“Shit,” Will whispered, and bolted towards the kitchen.

They’re home early, why are they early--

“Will?” Lucas stopped in his tracks coming out of the garage, Mike right behind him.

“Wait, Will?”

“Lucas, hi,” he coughed, already failing to look natural. “Mike.”

“Will, what are you—”

“Mike?” Will didn’t need to look back to know who had just walked in the room. The flabbergasted look on Mike’s face said it all.

“*Eleven!?*”

“Will, first you weren’t in class today, now you’re in my house,” Lucas pointed past him, “and now she’s here? What the hell is going on?”

Will put all his focus on Lucas and tried to ignore how Mike had immediately gone to El’s side. “I wasn’t feeling well after last night and... I wanted to check on Erica.”

Lucas stilled, and it felt strange for Will to see the genuine fear that filled his friend’s eyes. He’d already been gone when Lucas came home and presumably learned about his baby sister’s nighttime outing.

“El, does Hopper know you’re here? Why did—someone could have seen you!” Mike was getting louder and louder, and sort of looked like his head was going to explode. El, eyeing him a little warily, shrugged.

“No one saw.”

“But they *could* have—Will, why would you bring her?”

Will clenched his fist, “She’s a person, Mike, I don’t control what she does.”

El was clearly over it, putting both her hands on Mike’s face. “Mike—calm down.”

“Yeah Mike, calm down and shut up—I’m watching my show.” An irate voice from the living room called, and all four teens looked over to see Erica still sitting on the couch—alone.

Eddie was gone.

Notes for the Chapter:

hullo! I don't know why or how but I always end up

updating this fic when I am in the middle of a massive life shift, and in this case shit's crazy because i'm moving (not cities, just apartments) For clarification this fic isn't abandoned just because I don't have a consistent upload schedule-- I just tend to write in batches (and can't stick to my own outlines)

thank you to everyone who commented! you are why I do this. :)

(also I've written so many chapters where Eddie disappears at the end because I'm ~unoriginal~.)

stay safe!

10. We Need to Talk About Hawkins

Eddie pedaled until every muscle in his legs burned.

Away from Jane and Will, who still owed him a fucking explanation.

Away from Lucas and the Richie doppelgänger whose existence felt like some sick cosmic joke.

Away from Erica and the threat he didn't know what to do with.

It's time to pay the piper, Eddie.

When the Turtle dropped him in Hawkins and asked him to kill It (for the third time), Eddie had been frustrated. He'd been angry, he'd been sick, he'd been worried—but he hadn't been unsure. He'd gone toe to toe with the demented clown twice, he knew what it fed on, what it wanted—even in the almost 30 years between showdowns, it'd been more or less the same. And that was sort of the point, wasn't it?

It had never occurred to him that Pennywise might change the game.

There was a familiar tug low in his stomach, and he followed it without a thought, letting the bike coast further towards the west.

Why would the clown change now?

Lost in his questions, Eddie didn't notice exactly what the building off the side of the road was until his bike stopped in front of it.

It was an arcade. Of course it was.

Kids rolled in and out the doors in the afternoon rush and Eddie abandoned the bike by the side of the building to follow them. Immediately he was hit with a rush of AC, chemical candy smell, and teen boy sweat.

The arcade at the front of the Aladdin had been all they'd had in Derry, with its four or five machines, but Richie had diligently played each one over and over in a cycle until he had the high score, then

repeated the cycle to try and beat himself. On the most humid days of the summer, at least one of the Losers (usually Eddie, sometimes Stan or Ben tagged along) could be found keeping Richie company as he mashed buttons and ruined his eyesight from sunup to sundown.

Why do you even like the arcade so much, Rich? He'd asked once, annoyed they were standing around with other kids in the dark instead of helping Mike shear sheep with his grandpa or meeting Bev and Bill in the Barrens (not that he was eager to spend a lot of time around THAT mess waiting to happen.)

Well, Ms. Pac-Man keeps me company when your mom is busy, Eds— he'd kicked his bespectacled best friend in the shin for that one, but Richie just laughed and didn't miss a beat of said game. *I don't know, I like games. I like figuring out ways to beat it better, faster, with more points every time. Living to the maximum, you know?*

At the time, Eddie had nodded but didn't really understand—between Bowers, his gang and his mother, he didn't live in a world where he could “maximize his life.” Rather, he would have been happy to fly under the radar, to quietly make it through the rest of his school career without incident and get the hell out of Dodge after graduation. He didn't have the privilege of do-overs-- as it stood, it would be a miracle for him to make it through alive the first time.

In Hawkins, Eddie's feet padded along the multi-colored carpet until he found the same machine, sitting unused in a corner while kids flocked to the newer games like *Mario Bros* and *Dragon Slayer*. He put a hand on it and closed his eyes, just for a second.

Had Richie wondered why he felt so alone playing *Ms. Pac-Man*, after Derry? Had he felt the absence of a shorter figure goading him on, cheering obnoxiously when the ghosts caught up to the small yellow blob?

Eyes still closed, Eddie moved his hand to the controls. His thoughts drifted, for an impossible moment, to Stanley, bleeding out in a bathtub somewhere in Georgia.

The ghosts catch up to all of us, in the end.

“Hey,” an unfamiliar voice said, “you’re that kid with the oven mitts.”

Eddie opened his eyes and turned to see a girl with bright red hair shamelessly staring at him.

What is it with redheads?

She popped her gum obnoxiously. “You know Will Byers, right?”

Oh.

He vaguely remembered there being a girl with red hair at the school when he’d gone to find Will, but he hadn’t taken a good look at any of them except Will and the Richie look-alike.

“We’re... acquainted.” He turned away, hopeful she’d lose interest and go pester someone else. But in the true fashion of everyone Will seemed to know, she wasn’t easily deterred.

“Are you gonna play that?” She nodded her head towards the *Ms. Pac-Man* console. It was surprisingly clean, but it was also a lot newer than the near decade old thing they’d had at the Aladdin. Richie’s all-time favorite game, *Street Fighter*, wouldn’t even be released for another two years.

He shrugged. “Don’t have any quarters.”

She gave him a look, but pulled a quarter out of her pocket, holding it up. It seemed to gleam, even in the dark, semi-psychedelic arcade lighting. Eddie looked back at the console and then back to her, an eyebrows rising.

“It’s not even a two-player game—you can’t play with me.”

She rolled her eyes, finally stepping forward and pushing the quarter into the machine slot. “Lucky for you, I give excellent advice. This is my last quarter, so don’t waste it.”

Eddie’s hands found the controls again, and the screen came to life as the game began. Even though he’d mostly watched Richie those summers in the Aladdin, he’d played enough rounds with the pocket

change he sometimes got from doing household chores that it all came back like muscle memory. He forgot the redhead was there until she spoke again.

“I kind of figured you were a weirdo,” the girl said, “you know, with the oven mitts and everything.”

He didn’t know what to say, focusing on the lines of little dots in the maze before him.

“I’m Max. Max Mayfield.” She finally followed up, slotting herself beside him in front of the console, “How do you know Will?”

“How do *you* know Will?” Eddie countered, not letting his eyes leave the screen in front of him.

“We go to school together. And I’m dating Lucas.”

The words came out before he could stop them, “Erica’s brother?”

It was the wrong thing, and the air changed between them. Eddie narrowly avoided another ghost, and beat the level, but he was far from out of the woods.

“How do you know—”

“I don’t—Will mentioned her. Them. The Sinclairs.” His palms were getting clammy, making it harder to keep his grip on the joystick. A moment later Max pushed the joystick the opposite way he’d been planning to go, “Wha—”

“If you go right first, you’ll get stuck. Go left and come back around.” She directed, and before he knew it he was following her advice. They completed the rest of the level in relative quiet, the only sounds between them coming from the happily beeping Ms. Pac-man as she gobbled dots.

“So what was with the oven mitts?” Max asked, the air between them leaning back towards curiosity again.

“I have really bad...eczema. On my hands.”

“What-a-ma?”

“Eczema! The skin condition? Makes your skin all red and dry?” She looked down at his bare hands pointedly, and he scowled at her. “It only flares up sometimes.”

To his surprise, she started laughing, “you’re funny, weirdo, but you’re a terrible liar.”

“Okay, first of all, it’s Eddie, and second, Eczema is a *very* real condition that affects over ten percent of children in the United States —”

“Liar, liar” she chanted, but she was still smiling, “fine, don’t tell me. But I’ll figure it out eventually,” she leveled a look at him, and suddenly the grin had an edge, “I always do.”

They played together quietly for a while after that—well, he played and the girl called Max would occasionally jerk his hand in another direction if she thought he was going the wrong way. It was nothing like playing with Richie had been, but it was...oddly soothing. He let his mind wander again.

The Turtle rock was still in his fanny pack. If he asked it, would it know what Pennywise was up to? If it was going to keep him here, away from Richie and the ones who loved him, it was the least it could fucking do.

Richie seemed sad, in the dream. Was he eating enough? Was he drinking a lot like he had been in the Falcon? Was what he’d seen even real, or just another trick by the Turtle to get him to do its bidding?

Anger started to curl in his gut.

So he’d gone from miserable corporate meat-puppet to unwilling cosmic avenger. Fuckin’ great.

Max suddenly smacked him on the arm, “I said go down, weirdo!”

Eddie blinked, coming to just in time to see Ms. Pac-Man die at the hands of the red ghost. The words GAME OVER flashed across the

screen.

The anger inside hadn't abated, and he felt the flush begin to rise to his face. He stormed out of the arcade, Max hot on his heels. When they reached the curb, he turned on her.

"Why are you bugging me?"

"Why are you running away?" She shot back just as fast.

"I'm not running away from anything," he hissed, "Actually, I'm trying to fucking find something, but they couldn't make it fucking easy, could they?"

He plopped down on the curb, the anger inside already replacing itself with a curdling darkness he didn't care to name. At least he hadn't set anything on fire this time.

"Who's... they?" Max asked, confusion audible in her voice. Eddie threw his hands up towards the sky (to signify, you know, *them*) before burying his face in them and trying to take deep breaths.

Max sat down beside him (because of course she did, because of course his new burden in life was to constantly be followed around by obnoxious teenagers who asked too many questions) and tugged at the cuffs on her jeans.

"You know, I only moved here last year," she said after a few moments, "My mom got remarried and she and Neil wanted a fresh start or whatever. I couldn't even point out Indiana on a map and suddenly I was here." She laughed a little in a way that wasn't really laughing, eyes never leaving the pavement in front of her. "So what I'm saying is I get it, weirdo. I know what it's like to want to be anywhere else but a stupid tiny town in the middle of nowhere."

Eddie finally picked his head up out of his hands, and when he looked over at Max, she was staring at him with a look that was so Beverly it almost knocked him over. Not 40-year-old Bev Marsh, fashion designer, but the 13-year-old Beverly who ran around with steel in her eyes and old keys around her neck like if she could just find the right door, she'd disappear through it forever. It was a look

that used to terrify 13-year-old Eddie. It was like recognizing like.

Max didn't know him, but the look was somehow the same.

He'd wondered, in the short time they'd remembered each other from the Jade to his untimely death, if things could have been different for either him or Bev if he'd been able to acknowledge their similarities as children. If they could have leaned on each other for a kind of support none of the others—not even Richie—could really give. But he'd been young and scared, and even though he knew she'd forgiven him for it a long time ago, it left a sour taste in his mouth.

What if you could do it again?

What would you say to little Beverly now?

“I'm from Maine, originally. One stupid shit little town to another, I guess. And stop calling me weirdo, it's Eddie.”

... baby steps.

xxx

Max Mayfield didn't like being quiet. It was against her intrinsic nature. But she also wasn't a daydreamer the way the rest of the dorks she hung out with were, spinning fantasies for DnD campaigns in their heads or whatever. So when Max had to be quiet, she observed.

When she'd seen him without the oven mitts for the first time, she'd expected there to be bruises. Maybe a burn or something, as small as a cigarette or as big as a splash of oil that could still be accidental. Billy sometimes wore thick scarves in the heat of summer and sunglasses and the dead of winter without batting an eye about it.

He hadn't bothered covering up the large cut on his face but it looked older, so maybe he didn't feel the need anymore. Or maybe because he was new in town, it was easier to come up with a lie. But there

didn't seem to be bruises, or burns, and whatever had happened to his palms looked more like scraping against concrete rather than a knife. Now that they were sitting side by side and she could see clearly, the face thing had definitely come from a blade.

"So what brings you to Indiana then, Maine?" she asked, of the opinion that either coast HAD to be better than Hawkins.

"It wasn't really my choice," he breathed, eyes tracking some kids as they piled into a station wagon, chattering loudly. "I'm, um, looking for someone," he hesitated on an intake of breath. After a second, she tapped her sneaker against his and he sighed.

"But the—*person*—I'm looking for is—they've been the same, for years and years and suddenly now they are acting different. And I don't know why."

"You've known them a long time?"

Eddie let out a huff that could have passed for a hollow laugh. "You could say that."

She rested her chin in her hands. "People change, though. I thought my mom and dad loved each other but they got divorced anyway and here we are three years later living with Neil and Billy in bumfuck, nowhere."

"Who's Billy?"

"My stepbrother. Our parents got married when we still lived in San Diego and it was kind of cool, you know? I was an only child for so long and I know he thought I was just a kid but he'd teach me things, sometimes. But then something happened and we had to move, and Billy was really mad—after we got out here, he just totally changed. He said he had to 'start from scratch' and 'reinvent himself' if he wanted to be popular again."

The more he rebelled, the angrier Neil became and the louder the yelling, the darker the bruises, the tighter he'd grab Max's wrists in warning. The dimmer the light in his eyes got and the more manic his swings as he threw himself at Steve Harrington—

“...ax? Max?” She broke from her reverie to see Eddie looking at her with concern. She shook her head, red strands cascading down her shoulders.

“Sorry. You should stay away from Billy, if you see him. He’s a real douchecanoe.”

He was still looking at her, and it made her skin itch. “It sounds like you both had a hard time.” She shrugged.

“Like I said, people change. We have to adapt, right? It’s like evolution or whatever.” She knocked him on the shoulder, “Or are you one of those weirdo Jesus freaks, weirdo?”

The concern in his eyes was replaced by a comforting fury, “Don’t call me that—”

The sound of a horn cut them off, and Max looked up to see Billy’s Camaro swing around the small parking lot and slam on the breaks. She could see his head moving side to side as he scanned the crowds of teens for her.

She stood, picking up her board, “That’s my ride,” Eddie followed her gaze.

“Is that—”

She thumped him on the back again, “See you around, weirdo! Hope you find whoever you’re looking for!”

“It’s EDDIE.”

She grinned as she slid into the front seat. Billy was staring the way she’d come, eyes narrowing in a way that usually meant trouble, but he just turned his gaze towards the road as they pulled away.

“What, you got a new little boyfriend there? Another member of the loser brigade?”

Her smile dropped. “He’s no one. Just drive.”

By Saturday, even Hopper could tell something was off with the kid.

Not his first kid—the other one. Eddie.

God, when had he become a child wrangler?

He'd been moody and quiet for the last few days, which wasn't that different from the rest of the time, but he hadn't set anything on fire in just as long and Hopper knew better than to think quiet was good or lasting. Something was bugging him, but the kid was as tight-lipped as ever, refusing to break even for El.

That morning they all sat at breakfast, both teens pouting—El because he was forcing her to eat something with protein rather than the empty carbs and sugar she adored, and Eddie because, well.

“What’s on your mind, squirt?” Hopper finally ventured, which immediately got him a glare.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Then tell me what has you looking at those eggs like they killed your mother.”

The kid’s face twisted into something sour, and instantly he wanted to kick himself.

Jesus, traumatize the kid a little more, why don’tcha Jim?

“I just mean you seem... upset.”

Okay, so backtracking wasn’t exactly his forte.

“Wow ‘upset’, thank you for that astute observation Doctor,” Ah, there was the scathing wit Hopper didn’t miss.

“Well maybe if you would tell anyone what’s going on and why you’re here, you wouldn’t feel so shitty.”

Eddie had the nerve to roll his eyes at him, “Oh you’d love that, wouldn’t you cowboy? The good old boy cop rolls in to save the poor orphan child.”

Hopper could feel his blood pressure rising. Everything in his nature wanted him to flip the table and this little fucker with it, but he looked up to see El pinning him with a challenging stare. God, when she did learn to look at people like that?

He took a deep breath and let it out, ignoring how Eddie looked at him like he was prepared to dash from the table at any moment.

“I’m sorry about your parents.” Hopper forced out, pushing his empty plate away from him and lacing his fingers together atop the table. Eddie had the decency to appear at least a little startled. He pushed some scrambled eggs around on his plate.

“You said that already.” He mumbled, “before.”

“That’s because I mean it,” what the hell, he was just going to go for it, “when did they pass, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Eddie conveniently shoved a sausage in his mouth and took his time chewing. Hopper glanced over to see El had now turned her stare to Eddie, who was looking back at her helplessly. He finally swallowed.

“My dad died when I was really young, from cancer maybe? My mother had a heart attack in her sixties.”

“I’m sorry,” Hopper said again—a little shit or no, he knew how losing a parent could screw you up, “Who did you stay with, after that?”

“I hadn’t lived with her in a long time, by then I was with My—” Eddie started, but something in his expression flickered, and like shutters on a window, he closed off.

“My...?”

“Nothing. I was alone.”

There was a finality to his tone, and Hopper knew that was all they

were going to get out of him that morning. He and El locked gazes again, and she seemed so much older than her comparatively few years. But she'd seen a lot more than the average teen, he knew—and he was beginning to think Eddie was probably the same.

“Alright, well, time for me to pay the piper,” he stood up, already knowing the shit Flo was going to give him if he were late again, even though it was a Saturday. He was halfway to the sink with his plate when Eddie's voice rang out.

“Wait, what did you just say?”

He froze in place, “That I have to go to work now?”

He turned to see the young boy standing, hands face down on the table and face white as a sheet. El, for some reason, looked equally as alarmed. “Whoa guys, is there an emergency I don't know about?”

“That's not what you said—the thing you said, ‘time to pay the piper’.”

“I mean, sure, it's just an expression—”

“What does it mean? I mean, I kind of—I sort of know,” Other than the first fight they'd had when Hopper had still been convinced Eddie was a government spy in a tiny package, this was the most animated he'd seen the kid, especially in the last three days. “It's like ‘time to pay up’, right?”

“Sort of—it's from the Pied Piper of Hameln story,” when no recognition crossed either kid's face, Hopper continued, “The town of Hameln was plagued with rats, so they hired a piper to come lure the rats away with his music. Once the rats were gone, the piper returned for his money but the town refused to pay him. So early one morning when everyone was still sleeping, the piper used his music to lure away the town's children out of the town, and they were never seen again.”

Eddie was silent, but Hopper could almost hear the wheels turning in his head.

“That's messed up.” El said quietly, and Hopper ruffled her hair as he

walked towards the door.

“Well some of us were raised in labs, and some of us just had to be traumatized by Grimm’s fairy tales.”

“So it’s about revenge,” the little pyro finally spoke, and his tone was downright despondent, “his revenge was to take the children away while they slept.”

“It’s about suffering the consequences of your actions.” Hopper offered, but based on the look on Eddie’s face, it didn’t seem to help.

So much was happening, and deep inside all Hopper wanted to do was stay and crack open this weird kid and all the secrets he was keeping inside. But duty called, and there would have to be another time and place for that.

“Don’t leave the house, remember the rules.” He said, ruffling El’s hair one more time before letting the screen door slam shut behind him.

xxx

Holy fuck

Holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck

He never thought the crack in the case that had been plaguing him since he’d heard Erica’s voice in his ear would come from *Jim Hopper* of all people.

Eddie collapsed back in his chair, head spinning. Whatever Pennywise, or the Spider, or whatever the fuck it was was trying to do, it wasn’t totally random—or at least, it had some sort of basis in *something*. But why?

He was knocked back into reality by a hand on his wrist, and he looked up just in time to see Jane stare at the door. A moment later,

they heard the knock.

“It’s Will,” she said simply. She’d been nice enough to not push him to talk since Thursday, but they’d kept up their training, even though his mind was a mess more often than not. He vaguely remembered she mentioned Will would be coming over the weekend since he couldn’t really afford to miss more school for no reason.

No reason? Right, not like the life of every person in this town isn’t at risk. It’s all fucking fine and dandy.

“I still don’t know what’s going on, or really who you are or why you’re here,” Will started immediately, dropping a backpack on the floor, and Eddie rolled his eyes, preparing for another ‘hero of the day’ speech, “but I promised I’d tell you what’s wrong with Hawkins.”

“We have so many more problems than you even know, kid,” Eddie sighed, god, he felt old, “but tell me what the fuck is up with you and this weird, shitty town.

Will still looked uneasy, “You might not believe me, but everything I’m about to tell you is true.”

Eddie stared at him from his position still slumped over the table. “Jane can move shit with her mind. I can summon fire to my hands. Try me.”

Will just nodded before plopping down on one of the other kitchen chairs.

“A year and a half ago, I was leaving Mike’s house late one night, when I felt something following me...”

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello, no, not dead and this story is not abandoned. We’ve finally hit the end of the first arc, and I honestly can’t believe we’ve finally made it to 10 chapters of this bad boy. The plot, quite literally, thickens. (And somehow this chapter came out 1000 words longer than I intended and I STILL didn’t get

through my whole outline.)

I hope everyone is still safe and taking the time they need to take care of themselves and focus on transitions back into whatever "regular" life is going to be from now on. I'm sending you all love. And Happy Pride!

Author's Note:

Title is from the 30 Seconds to Mars song, "Kings and Queens".